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HELL ON TRIAL

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By

RENÉ BELBENOIT

Author of
DRY GUILLOTINE



Translated from the
Original French Manuscript by
PRESTON RAMBO



WITH ENDPAPER MAP OF FRENCH GUIANA

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A mon ami,

Austin McCormick

Commissioner of Prisons of New York City

René Belbenoit

FOREWORD

FORTY YEARS AGO injustice suffered by one man, Dreyfus, raised a storm of indignation throughout the entire world. In this book I show that there are still innocent men in Guiana. I cite the cases of Seznec, Courrèges, Charlot Pain, of whose innocence there is no doubt whatever. The Law itself is aware of it, but does nothing. These men are still there, buried alive.

In this book I give a picture of the lepers abandoned to their fate on an island in the middle of the Maroni River. Hundreds of doctors have visited the island. Hundreds of doctors have borne witness to the disgraceful conditions. But their lot has never been improved, and these outcasts shall continue to lead an existence worthy of the Dark Ages.

In this book I speak of the life of the *libérés*, those men who have paid their debt to society, but whom a scandalous law, nominally suppressed, but actually still in force, obliges to live in a colony in which there is no opportunity for them to make a living and where nothing is open to them except to die of hunger or to become criminals again.

In this book I describe the life of the convicts in the

Penal Colony. These men, some of whom really are criminal and deserve punishment, have yet been too much and too severely punished. I describe the life to which a civilized nation has condemned them. In effect, these men are sentenced, not only to hard labor, but to sickness, to loss of civil rights, and to death. And in this book I show the nature and standards of the administration which rules over this hell.

In this book, too, I describe the *relégués*. These men, nominally free, have no crime to expiate, but none the less they are submitted to a tyranny more sordid and frightful than that from which the convicts themselves suffer.

I show all this; and it is true (though almost impossible to believe) that *France knows all the facts* which I have accumulated in this book, because everything in it has been told her already by people more worthy of credence than I am, since they were not ex-convicts.

France must realize that the whole world sees this shame, for there are many foreign countries whose duty it is as well as it is their right to protest against the presence of such a cesspool in this hemisphere. All the republics of South and Central America, which are infested by escaped convicts, have a right to protest against this condition which threatens the order and security of their own people. In a single year (1938) Dutch Guiana, British Guiana, Trinidad, Haiti, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Venezuela, Colombia, and Brazil arrested

over five hundred of these escaped convicts. And what of those who were not captured?

When I escaped from Devil's Island on May 2, 1935, if I had been seeking freedom only, I should have concealed my true identity, like any other *évadé*. A fugitive does not go to newspaper offices, as I have done, nor does he tell his story in public. I should have vanished into some American country to earn my living under an assumed name. I should never have committed the folly of risking arrest and deportation! No! I escaped from the Penal Colony with one aim in view. *Dry Guillotine* represented part of that aim. This book is the rest of it.

I have set out to show to the world that its ideas about Devil's Island are not one-half as awful as the reality; and I have done my work in the hope that I shall have contributed to the abolition of this blot on the name of a civilized nation and this cesspool in the territory of the Americas.

René Belbenoit

GLOSSARY OF FRENCH WORDS

Official Terms or Convict Slang, Appearing in the Text

bagne: (the galleys) convict slang for prison or the penal colony.

condamné: a convict.

débrouille: rake off; graft (slang).

doublage: (doubling) the law by which a convict, after release, has to reside as many years in the penal colony as the length of his prison sentence.

évadé: a convict who has made an attempt to escape.

évasion: escape; whether successful or not.

fort-à-bras: rough-neck; an old and seasoned convict.

inco: a prisoner classed as "incorrigible" (slang).

libéré: a convict who has served his prison sentence but who is still condemned to reside in the penal colony.

môme: boy-pet; young pervert (slang).

plan: a metal or bone suppository used by convicts to hide their money or other small contraband articles (slang).

prévôt: a trusty in charge of punishment section of the jail.

relégué: an exile; a criminal with four convictions against him who has been banished to the penal colony, but without a prison sentence.

tafia: a cheap rum, made for local consumption in Guiana.

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HELL ON TRIAL

Chapter I

The Land of Pariahs

LAND of pariahs! Thus did Columbus brand Guiana when he discovered the region in 1498, because of the wretched Indians he found along the steaming tropical coast.

Four and a half centuries have passed: the Indians are gone but the "pariahs" are still there. Convicts cowering in dark cells, cursed by brutal guards. More convicts working naked in the jungle tormented by millions of mosquitoes, and dying by the score of fever, and dysentery from polluted drinking water. Two shoddy towns where *libérés*, the freed convicts who are forced to live in exile in the colony after they serve their prison sentence, wander hungrily in the weed-covered streets looking here and there for scraps to eat. *Relégués*, the riffraff of France, convicted on four counts of petty larceny, living in immoral squalor in jungle barracks. Even the ignorant inhabitants of the colony born within the shadows of crime and penal servitude, afraid to venture into the streets at night. All are pariahs, all at once victims and symbols of failure—failure of a penal system, failure of a colonization scheme, failure of a civilization.

The history of French Guiana is in fact one long succession of reverses; for where France was expected to bring progress and the benefits of her enlightenment, she has brought only shame and stark poverty.

After the disastrous Treaty of Paris in 1763 which took from France all her possessions in America except Guiana, Louis XIV decided to make something important out of the colony he still had left to his crown. Sensational propaganda represented Guiana as a veritable paradise, where one needed but to stoop and gather in cupped hands the gold which abounded everywhere in Guiana, the original of the Eldorado depicted in such glowing terms by the Englishman, Sir Walter Raleigh.

So thousands of colonists were recruited. These were, for the most part, eager but inexperienced bourgeois, ruined nobles to whom the king had granted large concessions. And in the company were a multitude of courtiers, dancing teachers, music masters, ladies in flowing dresses and plumed hats, all eager to go to the land of gold to amass a quick fortune.

No ships had been sent in advance to prepare the site for their arrival. They landed on a deserted wild beach over which waved coconut palms. The provisions brought from France were for the most part spoiled by the heat of the long voyage.

Almost at once the various tropical illnesses began their ravages. Meanwhile, more shiploads of people kept arriving, and in less than a year more than twelve thousand colonists landed.

A year and a half later, out of the thousands there were only a few hundred still alive. These took refuge on the three small islands they could see off shore which they named *Îles de Salut* (Islands of Salvation), because the climate there was less deadly than on the mainland. They called the largest island Royal Island, in honor of the king; another, St. Joseph, in homage to the saint under whose protection the expedition had sailed; and the smallest of the islands, guarded by strong currents which defeated all their attempts to land on it, they superstitiously named *Île du Diable* (Devil's Island). Finally even these survivors returned to France, and they painted such a horrible picture of the colony that the impression was never forgotten, and even to this day French Guiana is regarded as a colony where the climate is deadly!

About thirty years later another attempt at colonization was made. This time the colonists were not volunteers, but were victims of the French Revolution. After the fall of Robespierre in 1794 one hundred and ninety-three of his followers were deported to Guiana. Three years later, the *Directoire*, after its *coup d'état* of September 4, 1797, sent the great republican general Pichegru and a large number of deputies and journalists to join them. By a miracle these men had escaped the guillotine, but they became the first victims of the "dry guillotine."

Out of the five hundred and thirty deportees, after five years in Guiana, there were only fifty-four left.

Eleven had managed to escape: fever and other tropical maladies had accounted for the rest.

Among those who fled for their lives was General Pichegru himself, who was the first fugitive from Devil's Island to reach the United States. Unfortunately for himself, he made his way back to France and there lost his life for conspiring against Napoleon. Billot Varennes, friend of Robespierre, was another who escaped. He reached Haiti and died there in 1819.

The tragic fate of these unfortunates, and the gloomy stories told by the few who eventually made their way back to France, only served to confirm the opinion planted by the first disastrous colonizing experiment made in Guiana by Louis XIV.

An attempt was then made to exploit the resources of the colony by means of slave labor. African natives were sent over by the shipload to work the sugarcane plantations which a few hardened colonists had already established along the healthier rivers. At last the colony began to take on a semblance of prosperity. Cayenne developed into a town, ringed about with large plantations. Some of these, like the *La Gabrielle*, employed several thousand slaves. The Colony began to produce great wealth in sugar, hardwoods and spices. Cayenne pepper had become famous in France. But in 1848 France voted the abolition of slavery in her colonies, and the blacks on the great Guiana plantations would no longer work, but fled into the jungle, and in a new savage environment somewhat akin to their equatorial Africa, they

soon reverted to the wild along the rivers, and built themselves new villages deep in the heart of the jungle.

Without laborers, the plantations rapidly went to seed, and the planters were faced with absolute ruin. The black experiment had failed!

The French government then decided to experiment with Asiatic laborers. In 1850 several shiploads of Hindus, Malays and Chinese were brought to the colony. Unfortunately, however, most of these refused to lead a life of drudgery in the plantation fields. They set up their small shops in the streets of Cayenne and other villages, and it was soon evident that instead of supplying labor for the colonists, they were exploiting them! Thus the yellow experiment failed also.

It was then that France decided to solve the labor problem with convicts—the white experiment! On the 23rd of October, 1851, Prince Louis Napoleon, first president of the second French Republic, signed the decree which started the shiploads of chained men to Guiana. And in May of the year following, the first boatload of convicts dropped anchor off the Îles de Salut.

Sarda Garrida, Governor of the Colony at that time, came out to Royal Island and made a bombastic speech to the convicts. "By aiding the prosperity of the colony," he cried, "you are going to become men again and make a new life for yourselves!"

Alas! The very next day Dauny, convict number 23, murdered his comrade Ilhée, convict number 36! Imme-

diately the murderer was placed in chains and thrown on rocky Devil's Island, condemned to live or die there alone. And only forty-eight hours more had elapsed when two groups of convicts escaped from Royal Island with rafts they had hastily thrown together in the night! The fugitives reached the mainland of Dutch Guiana, and finally, after undergoing every sort of privation and misery, managed to make their way to the United States via British Guiana.

The New York *Daily Tribune* of November 29, 1856, wrote of their arrival:

"On the 20th of November last, 9 fugitives from Devil's Island landed in Baltimore from the ship 'Amazon', from Georgetown, British Guiana.

"A meeting of the republicans of New York to aid the French exiles who recently escaped from Cayenne in obtaining employment and relieving their immediate wants, was held last evening at the Broadway House, corner of Grand street. Owing to the state of the weather the attendance was not large.

"Mr. H. Browne, president of the Central Club, presided and Edward F. Underhill was appointed secretary.

"Soon after the organization of the meeting, several of the exiles entered the room in company with Mr. Gourieux, chairman of the committee of the French meeting recently held, and were congratulated on their escape from the prison of Cayenne.

"The subjoined resolutions, reported by the committee appointed for the purpose, were unanimously adopted:

"*Resolved*, That, while as republicans we cordially tender the oppressed of all nations who fly to this land of

liberty our heartfelt sympathies, we, on this occasion, especially welcome to the United States the expatriated sons of liberty who recently escaped from Cayenne.

"*Resolved*, That, as the justice of history equalizes the oppressed and the oppressor, so the exile may yet cherish hope for his country in the words of an American poet that proclaim:

> 'There is never a fight for the people's cause
> That is not yet thick with stars!
> And freedom's sleep is but breathing pause
> For strength to burst her bars.'

"*Resolved*, That, a committee of five be appointed by this meeting to procure employment and permanent aid for the exiles of France, recently from Cayenne.

"The President appointed as a committee, in accordance with the resolution, the following gentlemen. John A. Kennedy, ex-alderman, James Kelley, Edgar Ketchum, Benjamin F. Manniere, and Richard C. Mackormick, Jr. The meeting then adjourned."

Thus, in less than two days from the establishment of the prison, began the record of escape into the neighboring territories of the Americas. It has continued uninterrupted ever since!

The transportation of convicts to Guiana continued at the rate of two human cargoes each year. Clumsy, dark blockhouses of hardwood were built as penitentiaries to house them—at Cayenne, at Kourou and at Saint Laurent on the Maroni River.

Then, to swell the number of colonists and to rid France of habitual criminals, Parliament in 1885 passed

the law that every person having more than three sentences for theft, where each sentence was more than three months, was to be transported to Guiana as a *relégué*. This law applied also to women, and the convict ships now brought to the colony the condemned of both sexes.* A special wooden penitentiary was built south of Saint Laurent for the *relégués*. The law required them to be confined for six months, the period considered necessary for them to become acclimatized. Then they were free to establish themselves as settlers. But it at once became plain that these misfits of society had no abilities for wresting a living from the soil; so the six months' prison sentence became then, as it is today, a life sentence.

Meanwhile, what had the Government of the Colony done for it between 1852 and 1885?

By this latter date convict labor had been in use for thirty-three years. But the great plantations had all disappeared: the planters had abandoned their lands to the jungle. Guiana was a colony without colonists. Coffee and sugar, even, were being brought from France, whereas before the Colony had exported these in quantities, after supplying its own needs.

Came the year 1893, when anarchy ran its bloody course in France. Bombs exploded in the Chamber of Deputies, another razed to the ground a Police Bureau! President Sadi Carnot was assassinated. And a new law

* *Note:* In 1902 the condemnation of women as *reléguées* was discontinued, owing to the intolerable scandals it had given rise to.

was voted: Any person arrested preaching anarchy in public will be sentenced to Guiana for five years.

Half a hundred men guilty under this law were transported to the Islands; and when an amnesty was voted three years later, there were only fifteen of them still alive!

A year or two later a mutiny broke out in the Islands. Two guards were murdered by the convicts, as well as four Arab turnkeys. After the authorities had suppressed the rising they took a terrible revenge. The revolting convicts, who had taken refuge among the coconut trees, were rounded up, and over forty of them shot down in cold blood.

Then, in 1894, the famous Dreyfus case exploded to establish the name "Devil's Island" firmly in the public consciousness as a symbol of evil.

Accused of having betrayed France, Alfred Dreyfus was condemned to deportation for life, was sent to Guiana, and confined to a solitary existence on rockbound Devil's Island itself. He was placed under special discipline, watched by Corsican guards, who were as proud of Napoleon and as patriotic as they were ruthless and lacking in scruples. In the service record-book preserved in the colonial archives at Cayenne this order to his guards is written on the first page: "An intervention of a foreign power being feared to aid the escape of Dreyfus, every guard in the service is called upon, in the event of trouble on Devil's Island, to strike down the deportee, Dreyfus, before considering his own safety."

Months dragged into years, and then one day appeared in Paris the famous "J'Accuse" of Émile Zola, which led to the great writer being haled before the Chamber of Deputies and sentenced to a year in prison, but which also led to the exposure of the real traitor, the suicide of the forger of the false document, and to the complete rehabilitation of Dreyfus.

It was the lone case where the French system of justice reversed its decision. Dreyfus was brought back from Devil's Island where he had been confined almost five years, and was restored to his rank with full honors.

The Dreyfus affair had repercussions in all countries, and the entire world shuddered at the injustice of which the wretched officer was a victim.

The horror of Devil's Island became known to the whole world. And after this terrible wrong to an innocent man, it stands in the minds of millions of people as a synonym for Hell.*

* *Note:* Besides Dauny and Dreyfus, Devil's Island until after the War held only a third solitary prisoner, Benjamin Ulmo, a naval officer, condemned to 15 years confinement in 1909 for stealing the secret defense plans for the important naval base of Toulon.

Chapter II

A Talk with the Governor

THE day I left the Islands for Cayenne in September, 1929, was the most beautiful of my life. I was the only convict going to the mainland on the boat that calls at the three prison islands every two weeks to bring supplies.

I arrived on the mainland as night fell. When I walked up to the Cayenne penitentiary, I met the chief guard talking with other guards in front of the iron gate. The chief guard was amazed to see me.

"How is this? You back again?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, Sir," I answered quietly.

"How much did you get for your escape?" he demanded.

"Six months—cell," I said.

"And you weren't put on the Islands? You, with *your* record of escapes?"

"I *was* isolated on the Islands, Sir. But it was suspended, as you can see for yourself." And I tendered him my release: "Belbenoit, René, 46,635. Sent to the penitentiary of Cayenne by order of the Governor. Re-

leased from the penitentiary of the Islands by order of the Director of the Administration."

I was put in the barracks with the convicts of Class 3 —men having the worst marks in the prison. I found convicts I had been with there the previous year. They, also, were astounded to see me back from the Islands so soon! I had quantities of notes for them from their comrades on Royal and St. Joseph, and all these I distributed as soon as I was locked in. That night I played *belotte* (one of the favorite gambling games of the condemned) with my former comrades, and sipped a mug of coffee which the keeper of the barracks gave me to celebrate my return. What a contrast to the nerve-cracking monotony of the lonely Islands! Here most of the convicts had soft work, and grafts which got them money for tobacco and extra coffee and additional food.

The next morning, after roll-call, I was about to pick up my tools to start off to work when the chief guard called me and told me that I was to report to the Governor.

When I got to the door of the Government House I was streaming with perspiration due to my uneasiness and excitement. The Governor's messenger boy went upstairs to announce me. It seemed he had been gone an eternity. Finally, he came back to where I stood by the door, holding my wide straw hat in my hands, and said the Governor was ready to see me.

I climbed the steps, wiping my face on the worn sleeve of my red-and-white-striped convict tunic. The

door of the Governor's office was open, and I held myself at attention as I stood in it.

"Come in, Belbenoit," said a voice in clear, ringing tones.

I dropped my straw hat in the hallway, and went in.

"Sit down." The Governor was busy with some papers, and merely looked at me for a split second.

I was seeing Governor Siadous for the first time. He had just arrived to take up his duties as supreme head of the colony. He was a middle-aged man, with a little gray hair about his temples. One could read from his face that he was a man of will power and energy.

After a few minutes, he pushed the papers on his desk aside and turned to me. Before he spoke, I felt the chill of his penetrating glance as his eyes met mine.

"I wish to thank you for the manuscript you sent me from the Islands, Belbenoit," he said. His remark was so sharp and quick that it took me by surprise and left me unnerved. And I understood in a second how it was that he had made the two Commandants who had used their power to injure me respect his authority! His dynamic manner aroused respect and fear, and would demand complete co-operation. "What you wrote interests me very much," continued Governor Siadous, "because it seems written with frankness and, I believe, impartiality. I see, readily, that you have studied the system here to the last detail and have applied your knowledge very intelligently. The work will be of use to me as Governor of this Colony. I have had you brought here to the

penitentiary at Cayenne. You will work for me here in the Government House. I see there are only ten months left for you to do of your term, Belbenoit. You are not going to attempt to escape again?" The Governor's eyes seemed to bore into mine, as he asked me this question.

"No, Governor. I have made up my mind to finish out my term quietly," I replied.

He seemed to be measuring me with a friendly gaze, as if estimating the energy of my small, emaciated body under the red-and-white stripes of the convict clothes which hung loosely on me. He looked refreshing—his strong face was that of a human being, a contrast to the jackals into whose company he had come.

I followed the rapid drop of his gaze to his desk. Lying before him was a prison record-book, and I had time to see, as he opened it, the words: *Belbenoit, René, 46,635.*

"You were sentenced to eight years at hard labor for theft in May, 1922," he said. "And you arrived in Guiana on the 23rd of June, 1923. Is that right?"

"Yes, Governor."

He continued reading from my prison history, repeating the facts out loud to me without glancing up.

"Ten days after you arrived here you were sent out to Camp Nouveau, in the jungle. You escaped from this camp after you had been there 45 days. Caught, you were locked up in the Blockhouses for three months. Then you were tried by the T.M.S.,* and punished with

* *Tribunal Maritime Spécial.*

60 days in solitary confinement. You were released from solitary to enter the hospital, where you remained two months, after which you were sent back to Camp Nouveau. Is that correct?"

"Yes, Governor! That is correct."

He went on, sketching my record.

"At Nouveau, you refused to go out to work with the gangs. For this you were punished with repeated sentences, amounting to a total of 110 days in cell. You were pardoned from what remained of these punishments on the occasion of the Fête Nationale.* Thereafter you were employed as an attendant in the camp infirmary for several months. At this time I find you attempted to escape again from that camp?" And the Governor looked up at me.

"That is correct, Sir!" I replied. I was wondering uneasily what this review of my record as a convict was leading to! In the short time Governor Siadous had filled his post as the new supreme head of the colony, he had earned a reputation as a disciplinarian, and the word had run among the condemned that the officials of the Administration were ruffled by his demands on their time and by his outspoken disapproval of their laxness. I was wondering to myself how the new Governor proposed to cope with things—what path he would eventually take. Would he go hand in hand with the Penal Administration, which really dominates the civil authority of the Colony? Or would he attempt to run things as he

* French Independence Day—the 14th of July.

himself thought they should be governed? For him, as for every Governor of French Guiana, there would be no middle course!

The Governor's voice again drew my attention. "From January of the year following, to the middle of July, 1926, your time appears to have been divided among punishments in cell, as an incorrigible, and solitary confinement on St. Joseph where you served six months for insulting a doctor."

"He wouldn't put me in the hospital, and I was on the verge of death, Governor!" I exclaimed.

The Governor looked up. His gray eyes, searching my face, were friendly. He seemed very human, for all his abruptness. And his calm, assured voice gave me confidence in his presence. "Yes, I know that, Belbenoit," he said quietly, and dismissed my remark with a quick wave of the hand.

"In July," he continued, dropping his gaze again to my prison record, "you were employed as bookkeeper at the penitentiary on the Islands. You held this job almost three months, then you were removed and punished with three sentences of 30 days each in cell, for 'unjustifiable complaints.' To these three months in cell I find further punishments of 4, 8 and 15 days each on several charges.

"On the 1st of February, 1927, you were brought from the Islands to the penitentiary of Saint Laurent. And I see that three months later you escaped again, for the third time, and were caught in Dutch Guiana! The

T.M.S. punished you with 60 days in cell. And you were classed incorrigible for the second time and sent back to the Islands. Correct?"

"Yes, Governor," I assented.

"At this point my predecessor, Governor Juvanon, interested himself in you. He had you taken off the list of incorrigibles, and brought here to the penitentiary of Cayenne. Not many months later you attempted to escape for the *fourth* time—with papers obtained from another man, a *libéré* in the Colony, and were discovered on a boat sailing to the Brazilian frontier and arrested by a gendarme . . ."

"But Governor Siadous . . . !" I interrupted.

"Yes, Belbenoit?"

"Governor Juvanon had *left* the Colony and gone to France! He was recalled suddenly. I had served him against the interests of the prison officials, and I knew they were just waiting for him to leave, when I would be without his protection! That is why I tried once more!"

The new Governor looked at me with a slight flicker of amusement in his strong face. The haste with which I had interrupted him had not escaped his keen observation.

"Yes, I know that, too. I am well aware of it, Belbenoit!"

He resumed: "You were locked up ten consecutive months in a cell after this fourth attempt, pending trial again by the T.M.S. It sentenced you to six months of

immediate solitary confinement on St. Joseph, from which you were released two months ago."

He leaned back in his chair, and looked at me. "So far as *reports* go, those are the facts," he said. "Yes!" And he shut the prison record-book with a snap.

"I congratulate you on still being alive today, after that!" he remarked abruptly, and picked up a sheet of paper on which he had jotted down some figures.

"You have been here in Guiana a little more than six years—seventy-five months in all, to be exact! You have been in the cells, or locked up in solitary confinement on St. Joseph about two-thirds of the time! It's an amazing record of endurance!"

Governor Siadous turned his penetrating gaze at my slight figure standing before him, and spent a moment surveying me again from head to foot. "And I find it remarkable," he exclaimed, "to discover in your record that you have spent only eight months in all in hospital!

"But as for actual time spent at hard labor," he continued, "your value to the prison Administration has been negligible! One-third of the time when you did work, you have been set to jobs of bookkeeping, worked as attendant in an infirmary in one of the jungle camps, and have held various other light jobs in the prison.

"And here in your record is this letter addressed to the Director of the Administration, dated June, 1924. You tell him: 'I'd rather stay lying in a dark cell in irons

and on dry bread than work in the jungle and be eaten up by the mosquitoes and get fever.'

"It seems a rather negative attitude toward your work!" he remarked raising his eyebrows.

The Governor laid the letter down on his desk and turned to me. "But, Belbenoit, I have also examined your Army records. You were a good soldier, with exemplary conduct. I have read, further, with much interest the report you sent me about the living conditions here in the prison, giving your own suggestions for reforms that might be applied to the prison system in Guiana. You impress me as intelligent. You don't seem like a chronic rebel, or a real incorrigible! I simply cannot understand your line of conduct. Where do you expect to get? Black cell! . . . Solitary confinement! . . . And one attempt to escape after another! It's not with that sort of behavior that you will get anywhere!"

The Governor was visibly annoyed at me. His fingers were rapping the edge of the table impatiently.

"How is it that from the beginning you have behaved in this irreconcilable fashion? I want you to give me an explanation!" he commanded.

I could see that the Governor was frankly puzzled. My record just didn't make sense to him. "It's not a simple story, Governor," I parried.

"But I must know how and why you became an 'incorrigible,' and the only one of the prisoners here to be so classed twice in less than three years!" he commanded sharply.

I found myself trusting him, in spite of the habitual close-mouthed caution which I had acquired instinctively in the treachery of the Guiana prisons.

"I am interested in your case," he went on, "in spite of your prison record, which does not speak in your favor, and of the opinions of the prison authorities, which are even worse. I want you now to tell me your side of the story. Be frank! Nothing you have to say will be used against you. This is between us. You will do me a great service by being outspoken on all points. I want to hear from you why you are the convict with the worst behavior grade in the entire prison!"

"Governor, when I was sentenced to hard labor I was twenty-three. I was young! Eight years seemed an eternity!

"The night of my conviction I made up my mind right then and there to escape as soon as I got to Guiana. You know the sort of ideas they have in France about the prison colony here! People think getting away from here is pretty easy! They have that idea because every time there's an escape—and that's at least two or three times a month—the Administration cables the news to the Minister for the Colonies and he passes on the news to the papers. But when the prisoners are recaptured, the Administration informs the Minister by letter, and those letters very seldom reach the Press. So, in France they hear only how everybody escapes—and nothing about how many times we get caught after our

desperate efforts, either here or in the surrounding countries." I hesitated for a moment. But the Governor merely nodded for me to go on.

"And then, too," I continued, by way of illustrating my early illusion of escape, "there are quantities of novels and romances in France, where the heroes of the stories are *évadés*, both good and bad; making their fortunes in the Americas and coming back to France rich and living safely for years in high style."

"Yes, I know those novels," frowned Governor Siadous. "Even the boys devour them. They are patterned upon Hugo's great Jean Valjean—but they are the wrong sort of adventure for young minds!"

"Even the underworld has got the idea this is the easiest place in the world to get away from. Why, I'll tell you a story about that, Governor, with your permission!"

He nodded, and said to go on.

"The night before my own sentence, two men were brought back out of court. One of them had just been sentenced to fifteen years over here, and his companion was sentenced to only six years in jail in Paris. The man coming to Guiana for fifteen years and hard labor consoled the other man: 'You poor devil, you! It's hard luck, you didn't get a break!' He meant that he'd be here only a few months or so, while his comrade would do *all* of his six years, for you don't ever escape from any of those prisons in France!

"That's what the men *all* believe, Governor! And I

did too! I got into the stifling hold of the convict ship certain I wouldn't stay here many weeks!"

"I expect you soon got over that idea," the Governor said dryly.

"No, because my first week in the Colony was like an enchantment. After the terrible discipline at Saint Martin de Ré and the horrible crossing on the convict ship this seemed pretty soft. Discipline didn't exist! We were allowed to talk. We could even smoke! And sing, play cards and gamble! It was like a paradise, without cold, and plenty of warm sunshine all around.

"Then—ten days later I was sent out into the jungle to Camp Nouveau. And in a week I realized the horror of this green cesspool! It was a hell to frighten Dante himself!"

"Is there so much difference between the main penitentiary here in Cayenne and the camps, Belbenoit? . . . You were sent out there in the jungle to work hard!" the Governor commented.

"You don't know, Sir, what's waiting for the new men—fresh off the convict ship! The first thing, the Administration sends these new men, who are accustomed to the temperate European climate, and to living and working in cities, out to camps like Nouveau in the jungle. The Administration thinks that the newly arrived are stronger and better-disciplined than the old stagers, so it sets them to do the hard work which the experienced convicts won't—even under threat of the most savage punishment.

"Fever and dysentery get every man! Clouds of buzzing mosquitoes and fire ants sting your bare feet and aching body while you labor. Hordes of flies settle on your festering sores, and you have to keep picking them out of your rice and soup as you sit on the ground to eat. It drives a lot of men insane! And with all that, the jiggers all over the camp lay eggs that grow big as a pea under the nails of your feet and hands and give you blood poisoning. At night the vampire bats come into the open barracks and bleed the sleeping men white! You are already exhausted by the heat and long day's work; and after a few weeks, you are so anemic it's all you can do to stand on your feet!

"When you are like this, ready for a hospital, you are pulled out of the barracks at dawn. And with only a pint of weak coffee under your belt, you have to be on your feet all day chopping hardwood. If you break under the work you don't get your ration of food at night! Day after day it's like that! Most of the new men can't stand these conditions, Governor!"

"So it's as bad as that!" the Governor said grimly.

"Yes, Sir. The new men die like flies. Half of them are dead by the end of their first year in Guiana! And half of those still left alive, will die in the course of their second year here in the Colony. These figures, as you must know, are official, Governor!

"The quarter of the original shipment still alive in the Colony by the end of the second year have become adapted to the climate of Guiana and the environment

of the prison. They have fitted in with things here, physically and morally.

"The old convicts victimize and exploit the new men just as mercilessly as the Administration does. It's 'new blood,' 'sweet meat' for them every time a new cargo arrives!"

Governor Siadous' face had set very hard. He preserved an absolute silence, as he motioned with his hand for me to go on. He had leaned forward slightly. I could see that this was a matter he was vitally interested in probing.

"These old convicts look for the young men. And they fasten onto them! Many of these older men who are sex starved by their life here without women, were the prey of other convicts when they first came to the Colony. The environment here has made them vicious perverts, and they in their turn lie in wait for the young men. This is a deadly place for a decent man, Governor! There aren't many men who escape contamination.

"And there are others waiting to bully you into trading away your new blankets, and clothes and shoes which were allotted to you at Saint Martin de Ré before boarding the prison ship. You have all these things in your canvas bag when you land, and they offer you bananas, cigarettes, knives—all the stuff you crave! The new men are easy to swindle! Also, they are all eager to make friends and avoid enemies.

"If you live long enough to get adapted to the way of things here, you learn it's 'every man for himself.'

"You forget all about shoes. You can work naked from the waist up in the steaming jungle under a cloud of mosquitoes and flies. You get accustomed to sleeping in the same sweaty trousers you wear day and night, until they are about to fall apart with rot. It's the only piece of clothing you have! You forget about underclothes, soap, toothbrushes, handkerchiefs. You eat out of a bowl, sitting on the floor of barracks at night, and on the ground in the daytime. Soon your teeth rot, or fall out with scurvy in solitary confinement. The regulations forbid bundles, packages of clothes and other things from relatives and friends. In time you stop writing home. You are ashamed and depressed, or have fallen out of stride with the world outside and can find nothing pleasant to say. It's tragic, Governor, for the hundreds of men sent here who aren't brutes or hardened criminals, who have some good and decency. They suffer terribly in mind and spirit. They can see themselves sinking into this cesspool, and know they are doomed! That there is no relief . . . except escape! They are the ones who try hardest to get out, willing to take all the chances. But they have the least experience in these matters and usually die in the attempt or get caught, because they don't know how to prepare their get-away properly! The big criminals, when they make their break, usually succeed. They escape, and don't come back!"

The Governor's office was so still you could hear the low sounds from the street beyond the windows. His

gray eyes were looking right through me. "So that explains your escapes, Belbenoit!"

"Yes, it's the only hope. And every month that you wait counts against you. In this prison where there are no books for us to read . . . nothing to stimulate a spirit for good . . . no religious provision for us thousands of men who are condemned to stay here, you can't help sinking lower and lower!

"If you accept the conditions, you become a sordid animal. Those who have done this think only to make things as easy for themselves as they can. They are satisfied with their gambling, their petty graft and their *nômes*. They find ways to make friends with the guards, and betray their companions for favors or for a bottle of *tafia*.

"This is so true, Governor, that a minister once said, 'Bringing the freed convicts back to France would be a serious error. These men were perhaps good when they were shipped to the Colony, but they have become exceedingly dangerous men by the time they get out. They are unfit to take their place in society!' "

"Do you see much vice in the Colony, Belbenoit?" the Governor asked abruptly.

"There's too much of it to cover up, Sir! The Administration closes its eyes to it. The highest officials and the guards are all besmirched with it. In these six years, Governor, I have never heard tell of a convict being punished for homosexuality. On the contrary, it's a source of graft to many of the officials.

"And I've seen hundreds of the convicts brought up before the T.M.S. for murder, and the average sentence has been six months of solitary—*six months for lifers!* And I have been sentenced to double that for merely making complaints!"

"Yes, Belbenoit! What you have just told me supports what I have heard of vice-conditions." The Governor gave me a nod of agreement. "You convicts here manage to get money. Tell me how you yourself have been able to do this."

"*Débrouille*—graft, Governor! My first bit of *débrouille* was writing letters for my companions. I had a nice-looking handwriting, and wrote a fairly good letter. Some of the men didn't even know how to write. For each letter I wrote for a man I'd receive in payment a few cigarettes, or a ration of coffee or a couple of sous. I wrote letters of protest for them. Others were for men wanting to be transferred from one camp to another, or soliciting some job, or even complaining of the violence of the guards. Some of the complaints were heeded by the authorities, and the convicts attributed all this success to the way I'd written the letters. That earned me something of a reputation!

"I wrote often enough complaining about things on my own account, too. And it was this that in the end brought me my first soft job. The Administration thought it was better to meet me half way and get rid of a nuisance! That was when I was made attendant in the infirmary at Camp Nouveau in 1924. And that was

when I wrote the letter you just read!" I informed the Governor.

"Oh, yes—you preferred being in irons to working in the jungle!" he said.

"I was in acute misery when I wrote that letter. All I had to my name was one pair of torn old trousers, and they reached only to my knees. No blanket, no shoes either! I was bitten all over by insects, and half-starved. It made me so desperate that I refused point blank to go out into the clearings and work in the sun.

"So I was thrown in a cell! And once in there, I spent my time writing letters to the authorities—about the soup that was nothing but flavored hot water, the bread ration that was moldy and less than the regulations provide for, about the coffee which was so weak it was transparent and tasteless.

"Then one morning the chief guard of the Camp came to my cell. 'Tell me, Belbenoit,' he said, 'did you get sentenced to hard labor for giving a penny to a beggar?'

"I was puzzled by that remark and merely looked at him.

" 'For what were you convicted?' he asked me.

"Theft, I said.

" 'For theft!' He burst into a roar of laughter.

"When he could catch his breath he said to me: 'So then! When you were in civil life you went around robbing people. And now, here you are claiming you've been robbed of two grams of coffee—and writing to all

the officials about it. To the Governor, to the Director and even to the Ministry!'

"But I retorted that I didn't steal food from starving men. And that I had a right to complain against those who were lining their pockets by reselling the provisions.

"He stopped laughing and looked at me calculatingly. 'Why won't you go to work, Belbenoit?' he said.

"Because it's better here in my cell on dry bread and water than slaving in the blazing sun, half naked and starved!

"And he asked if I would stop my complaining if he got me a better job.

"I was willing to work, if I had enough to eat and a little tobacco, I told him, and the next morning I was in the Camp infirmary as an attendant.

"You've got to play the game, Governor, else you don't last long! It's vicious—not every man can adapt himself. At the infirmary I had a soft job. I made good use of it every way I could, and in three months I was off on another escape. . . ."

The Governor interrupted me abruptly. "You said you made good use of your job. What does that mean?"

"It was my *débrouille*—my graft, *monsieur le Gouverneur!*"

"Graft! In a hospital job?"

"I merely sold the supplies—if I didn't, someone else would," I replied simply. "The iodine, and the quinine, you know, to *libérés* who sell in turn at a better price

to the blacks in the gold mines up the river. That is their racket for a few sous! Convicts bought bandages from me for making butterfly nets. They sell the butterflies to the Chinese merchants in Saint Laurent. Then, I watered the condensed milk—and that gave me an extra liter to sell each night to the men in my camp barrack. Little by little, in this way, I gathered together my escape money.

"My one thought was to get out of here while I was still alive. I wanted to live!"

"Yes, I suppose you did," Governor Siadous said rather grimly. "Go on!"

"Well, later when I was sent to the Islands for my second attempt to escape, I took up writing protests again. Before writing any of those complaints I would secure proof of what I was saying. And so, by questioning other convicts, and by listening to the stories of the old hands, I became acquainted with all the goings-on of the officials of the Administration, and most of the shady things going on in the Colony!

"And my long years here have gone by like that, Governor, divided between escape and fighting the Administration. Certainly it's brought me hardships enough! But the results have been in my favor, for at least I have the respect of the other men. And I've known enough not to overplay my hand! So far the Administration hasn't considered me dangerous enough to have me killed outright!"

"But, if you had had a good conduct record from the

start, Belbenoit, don't you believe you would have found it easier here?"

"Good conduct, Governor?" I had to smile. "A good record never gets a man anywhere, here!"

"Oh, but come, Belbenoit! Look around Cayenne. A good behavior record would have given you a chance. The Class 1 convicts have good jobs. Plenty of them even work in the houses of the civilian population, and are allowed to sleep in the town at night." *

"*Monsieur le Gouverneur*, you'll discover that it isn't the Class 1 men with the best behavior records who get these easy jobs and special privileges!" I replied.

"How is that?" he demanded.

"I can prove it to you right away. Take that phone beside you and call the Cayenne penitentiary. Ask the total enrollment. Then ask how many worst behavior Class 3 men are there. Then, Governor, ask for the total enrollment of Camp Kourou, the 'Death Camp' as we call it, out in the swamps—and how many Class 1 convicts are out there. You'll see how far good behavior gets us!"

The Governor, without a word, picked up the receiver and got the bookkeeper of the Cayenne penitentiary. He put the questions to him, jotting the answers on a pad. "These are the figures: Cayenne: total enrollment 635 men, 285 in Class 3. Camp Kourou: total en-

* *Note:* When the convict first arrives in Guiana he is graded as Class 3, the class which is called on to do all the dirtiest and hardest work. Two years of good conduct makes him eligible for Class 1, members of which are allowed to work in private houses and at the pleasanter sort of jobs.

rollment 186 men, 94 in Class 1." He looked up. "How is it that half of the men in the Death Camp at Kourou are Class 1!" he exclaimed.

"It works out this way, Governor. The 94 men of Class 1 at Kourou are submissive and cowed by the guards. They get put on the good behavior record because they never complain. They are not grafters. Those are the men, Governor, who should be here at Cayenne, instead of at Kourou in the heart of the swamp, working waist deep in mud and water. Kourou is the 'regulating camp.' Every time the number of convicts passes the normal total the prison can care for, the Administration opens it up. Men die like flies there. Two thousand have died in three years! On the other hand, if you have a bad conduct record, but have money to slip to the guards and Commandants, you get jobs that carry good *débrouille* here in Cayenne. As you've just seen from the enrollment, two-thirds of the men here are Class 3. They have the run of the capital, the best jobs with civilians, the best prison food in the Colony, and good barracks. And I can assure you, if you want to investigate, that the few Class 1 men who are here are not given the best jobs. It's only the ones who have the money who get those jobs! That's the essential—money, not good behavior! And another thing—it's easy to get listed in Class 1 if you have a hankering for that, if you can make it worth while for the bookkeepers and the guards! Some of the men who still cherish hope of a

pardon, and need to have a clear conduct record, do that!"

"Just the same, Belbenoit, I hope you will watch your behavior! I've had you released from the Islands and brought to Cayenne, and you must show yourself worthy of my interest in you."

"I'll do my best, Sir!" I said.

The Governor leaned back and his fingers played a light tattoo on the arm of the chair.

"Good, Belbenoit!" he said. "Report here tomorrow at 8 o'clock. I'll have plenty of work for you to do. That is all now—you can go!"

In company with my guard I walked slowly across the stagnant town back to the penitentiary, raising clouds of busy blowflies as I passed along the dirty streets. I felt a mounting elation surging deep inside of me. The talk with the new Governor had given me new life, somehow. He was human! I felt an obligation to the man who had given me a real chance to be useful! And I told myself that I would be worthy of his faith in me.

Chapter III

Paroled for a Year

I DULY reported in the Governor's office. I was put to work to classify the colonial archives.

There were whole rooms piled deep with papers which had been stuffed into them. The tables and chairs in the archive rooms were stacked with bundles of them, many unopened. I estimated that there was not less than a hundred tons of it, all of which was to be sorted and classified. Dust lay everywhere. I read on wrappings addresses from all corners of the earth. In each of the rooms I swept up the dust along an entire side, and then with wet rags I scrubbed off the grime and dirt. As I opened bundles and broke wrappings and sorted out the stacks, I arranged the papers in rows under separate headings on the cleared floor. I cleaned out the long rows of shelves lining the walls. I had to read everything I picked up, thumb through pages of records and folios to see what they were about, and figure out under what headings to file them. Days passed into weeks. With the Governor's help, I reorganized the filing system in the archives, breaking it down to more specific headings.

Every few days he would come to see how the work was progressing. Often he stood in the midst of the material lying on the floor to read some fresh record or document of deep interest to him.

Documents, reports, clippings and official papers from the Ministries, statistical data—all passed through my hands, as every day I cleared up the disorder. There were large quantities of newspaper clippings and magazine articles, too. These had been sent in by French government officials abroad.

Needless to say, this work fascinated me! There in the archives was the entire history of the Colony of French Guiana, its exploration, its colonization, its political history. And, even more interesting to me, right under my control of classification were the entire history and official records of the prison from its foundation in 1852! There were moving appeals written by convicts for better treatment—complaints, reports of escapes, trials of convicts, figures and statistics on mortality rate, accounts rendered of the prison food supplies, clothes supplies, and materials used by the Administration for the maintenance of the prison. Also, there were reports made by the Governors of the Colony, containing their impressions and suggestions for the prison. Other reports by Directors of the Administration, and still others by various doctors in the hospitals for the condemned. With all these were little-heeded instructions from the Ministries in France.

For many months I worked steadily at this highly absorbing job. I had permission from the Governor to eat my meals there in the archives. This saved me the time lost going back and forth to the penitentiary, which was a good distance away. I reported at the penitentiary only in the evenings at nine o'clock. Every day, as I went along with my filing I took notes at odd hours, a little at a time. I was sure that the information I got from these sources would prove useful in the future.

One afternoon the Governor was in the archive room, browsing around in a section of files.

"Well, Belbenoit, how's it going?" he remarked.

"Very well, thank you, Governor," I replied, stopping a moment to rest. The Governor took a turn around the room and then came and stood in front of me.

"When are you due to be freed, Belbenoit?" the Governor demanded.

His question was very casual. I answered simply, merely giving him the date of my liberation—the 20th of next September.

"And what are your plans after you are freed?" he inquired.

"Escape!" I answered frankly.

"You are going to try to escape, *again?*" He seemed surprised that I was willing to take the risk.

I assured him that four failures were not enough to discourage me. "You know well enough how it is here

when you're a *libéré*, Governor. In the Colony I have no way to make a living. What'll I do if I don't escape? Go out in that fever-ridden jungle and gather rubber or hunt butterflies for a few sous! Life holds more worthwhile things than mere existence. I'll first take my chance at freedom, or die trying!" I exclaimed. "Outside the Colony in one of these countries I can start life over again. I'm still young, I can find honest work! I have the will to live—if I stay here I shall only starve or get knifed!"

The Governor looked at me in silence. Then he turned to a file of papers he had in his hands and fingered them a moment. Suddenly he looked at me and said: "No, Belbenoit, you won't have to escape! I am going to authorize you to leave the Colony."

I stared up at him from my pile of papers as if I had had a stroke!

I was so overcome that tears streamed out of my eyes, and all I could say was, "Thank you, *Monsieur le Gouverneur!*"

And that evening, when I lay in my bunk back in the penitentiary, I knew my permission would go into effect, as surely as the sun would rise! I was *sure* that I would leave the Colony. When the Governor made statements they became facts. Before, for eight years my only ray of hope had been the thought of escape! Now, in a moment I had been freed from sleepless nights, worry, fears, and the dejection of my thoughts!

I worked on in the archives until the beginning of April, 1930, when, one morning, the Governor announced to me that I would have to return to the penitentiary. But he assured me I was to be given a good job there, and that I should have it until I was set free.

He said that he could no longer take out of the Colony's budget the 50 francs a month he had allotted as my pay. I knew it wasn't my small salary of 50 francs that made it necessary for him to dismiss me from Government House. It was the Administration which had at last succeeded in getting me away from its archives! The high officials of the Administration had informed the Governor that I had supplied much of the material for Mrs. Blair Niles, when she visited the Colony, to write *Condemned To Devil's Island*, published in the United States two years before. And the prison officials knew that I was still in correspondence with Mrs. Niles. No wonder they objected to my being employed to examine and file the Administration's records.

I returned to the penitentiary where, up to the time of my liberation, I served as bookkeeper. The guards ceased to annoy me because they knew I was under the protection of the Governor. And although I suspect they would have loved a chance to make things tough for me, they gave me no occasion to complain against them.

The 20th of September, 1930, I was freed. I had paid my debt to society. I was restored to civilian life, and divested of the ignoble stripes of the convict. But I was

required by law to spend the rest of my life in the Colony!

The day I left the penitentiary, the Administration informed me that if next morning I was still found in Cayenne I would be arrested and sentenced to one month in prison. Most of the *libérés* are forbidden the capital for a period of ten years. I went immediately to see the Governor to ask him what to do.

I hadn't seen the Governor since the day I left my work in the Government House. Months had gone by. He greeted me in his friendly manner, and congratulated me on having gained my freedom.

He listened to my story. Then he said:

"Have you any money?"

"Yes, Sir. I have twelve thousand five hundred francs."

"Twelve thousand five hundred francs?"

"Mrs. Blair Niles, the American lady who was allowed to visit the prisons when M. Juvanon was Governor, paid me the money, *Monsieur le Gouverneur*."

"Well, Belbenoit, write me a formal request to leave the Colony for the period of one year and bring it here to me!"

I walked down the steps of the office, and rushed out of the Government House with tears of joy dimming my eyes!

In the middle of the month of October, the Official Journal of the Colony appeared with this notice published in its pages:

DECREE OF THE GOVERNOR
OF FRENCH GUIANA

The Governor of Guiana and the Privy Council of the Colony, in the session of the 27th of September, 1930, Decided: That *libéré* René Belbenoit, whose *libéré* Number is 16,444, is authorized to leave the Colony for a period of one year.

Given in Cayenne this 27th day of September, 1930.

SIADOUS *Governor*

The day before my departure from the Colony a gendarme came to inform me that the Governor wanted to see me.

"Belbenoit," he said to me in his office, "wherever you go you will find people eager to lay hands on stories about the prison—or get you to write for newspapers what you saw in 'Devil's Island,' as they call it.

"I want you to give me your word of honor that you will not write or release anything about this prison while you are in a foreign country."

I gave Governor Siadous my solemn word of honor that I would observe this condition.

"I feel I can place my trust in your word, Belbenoit!" he smiled, grasping my hand. "And now, good luck!" and he took me to the head of the steps, and watched me as I went down. When I got to the open door of the Government House he waved to me as I turned to look back, and then I walked into the sunlit streets!

Chapter IV

To Panama as a Free Man

NEXT day, November 12, 1930, I went aboard the *Biskra,* one of the smaller ships of the French Line which operates among the islands of the Caribbean.

In the long eight years I had been a convict I had made but one enemy—the Penal Administration. I had been condemned to hard labor for eight years, but these eight years had stretched into nine. Six of the years I spent in a cell and in solitary confinement. I had suffered much, but in the end I had won, for here I was, leaving the Penal Colony with a passport in order, a passenger with a ticket in his pocket! And for the space of one year I was as free, in principle, as any man.

When I heard the first blast of the *Biskra's* siren, announcing its departure, a hand seemed to grip my heart. The *Biskra* was taking me away—away from so much that I feared and hated. Yet over there within the walls of the Cayenne penitentiary, under red roofs which seemed like so many crimson splotches, others were still convicts, some of them my friends. They also had heard the blast of the ship's whistle and must have sighed—some with deep envy and some with an even deeper despair. For one and all they knew that I was leaving.

Only a few weeks before this I had been their companion in misery, and now I was free. *Free!* Going away free, a passenger on a ship, even! *Free!* While they, they were staying there with Death.

How many times on the Islands, seeing this same *Biskra* pass by, had I said to some convict friend: "When will we take passage on her!" In my heart I knew it would never happen. And the others knew it would never happen to them, too. Looking in now from the outside of things I was grimly sad—sad as I'd never been before, in all my long, dragging years in the horrors of that relentless slow death! While I had been part of that Hell, while I had been a damned creature with the others there, I had never realized so much the depths of our frightful misery. My thoughts had been only for escape! But this day, as I was slipping off the shackles fastened about my life, I saw the real bottom of the misery of those I left behind.

And as the ship sailed off into deep water, leaving the mainland farther behind us every minute, I could not take my eyes from the spot filled by the penitentiary's red roofs. Something deep within me kept repeating to me, over and over again, that I was not leaving the place forever and—happy and sad—I lacked the feeling of certainty that I was truly free.

All night I paced the narrow decks, as the coast boat continued its way onward to Saint Laurent, where we made a short stop next morning.

I was ashamed to go ashore from the clean decks of the

coast ship, for on the long board pier were the usual bedraggled men, *libérés* come to try and glean a few sous, and I certainly didn't want to flourish my own good luck before their wan and weary eyes. In haggard faces here and there, I recognized old acquaintances—men who in previous years had been convicts with me. While still convicts they had looked better dressed than now and more presentable, even though in convict stripes, for they had been kept shaven by the Administration. But now, in tattered dirty rags, many of them dressed in sacking, with beards and hair left uncut for weeks, faces gaunt with semi-starvation, they were a sight to pity. So I stayed on board—ashamed of my own good fortune before the withering tragedy of their misery. I went over to the side of the ship which faced the Dutch side of the river, and gazed in silence at Albina in Dutch Guiana.

When some of the *libérés* came aboard, I did what I could to help them by buying some of their trinkets; but I could see envy and hatred in their eyes as they looked at my spotless new civilian clothes, and compared my lot with theirs.

Once more the whistle blew, and we steamed down the glaring yellow waste of the Maroni. There was no breeze in the high noon as we turned westward at the mouth. More days passed, uneventful and hot, and we stopped for a few hours at Paramaribo . . . then Georgetown. And, next, to Trinidad, the mid-ocean island oasis of the fleeing *évadés* of Devil's Island. Had it been a ship

sent by the Administration our route could not have been better chosen, for at each of these places fugitives were waiting in the prisons to be taken back to French Guiana!

I left the *Biskra* at Guadaloupe. There at Pointe-à-Pitre I remained a week, staying with the Saint-Paul de Chartres Sisters to whom I had a letter from the Mother Superior at Cayenne who had befriended me during my last years as a convict.

On December the second, I boarded the *Pérou* of the French Line, with a ticket for Venezuela, intending to go to Caracas, the capital, to find work. After I had settled my baggage in my cabin, I went up to the promenade deck. The first passengers I saw were three guards from Guiana returning to take up their posts after leave in France. They were on their way to Fort de France, Martinique, the first port of call on the way to Venezuela, there to take the *Biskra,* on its return trip to Cayenne.

I immediately recognized one of them—a burly and brutal crook with whom I had had dealings on the Islands during the past year. He had been in charge of the clothing supplies for the convicts, and had refused to give me a new blanket to which I was entitled. His pretext was that since I had only another year to serve, my old blanket was in good enough state. And so, like scores of other convicts, I was forced to use a blanket which was shredded and patched while he sold new blankets and clothing to the contrabandists. I wrote a

letter exposing all this to Governor Siadous who, after an investigation, demoted him to a less lucrative position and fined him heavily at the same time. And as I thought of the great surprise that would be his, now, at seeing me on deck, I was filled with a devilish glee.

I lit a cigarette and strolled past the group. They were talking among themselves as they lounged in their deck chairs under the white awnings. One of them was fanning his hot face with a newspaper.

They obviously didn't recognize me in my civilian clothes. I did a half turn about and passed in front of them again, this time looking right at them! Several times I did this! And then the guard I had known on the Islands suddenly gave me a sharp look.

"Here we go!" I thought to myself.

Out of the tail of my eye I could see all three of them examining me from head to foot! They got up and went inside. Before long a steward came looking for me, saying the Purser wished to see me in his office.

I went to my cabin. Quickly I gathered up my passport and a copy of the official publication of the Colony containing the decree of the Governor authorizing me to leave. I then placed in my wallet a large quantity of one-dollar bills into which I had converted all my money at Guadaloupe, knowing dollars would be good anywhere. This done, I proceeded to the Purser's office.

When I appeared in the doorway the three guards were gathered around the Purser, talking to him excitedly.

"Mr. Belbenoit?" he asked, interrupting them brusquely.

"Yes, Sir!" I replied.

"These gentlemen are insisting that you escaped from the French Guiana prison."

I laughed heartily and exclaimed:

"They must be mad!"

"They are guards from the prison who say they know you. Can I see your passport?"

"Certainly," I replied. And I produced my wallet from my breast pocket and opened it in the presence of the three guards. When their eyes fell on the thick lining of dollar bills they exchanged a quick look. I knew they were thinking: Surely, he's just robbed somebody! They seemed ready to pounce on me like wolves!

I turned my back on them and said to the Purser, "These men mean absolutely nothing to me. And, if you please, I will show my papers to you *alone!*"

"Belbenoit, we know you!" the guards shouted. One of them snatched at my passport. "His papers are false! He's an *évadé* from Guiana!" they angrily informed the Purser.

"You'd better be careful what you say!" I said sharply, with a level look. The Purser led me into another room, and there I showed him my papers. And I explained my situation to him, to which he listened with grave attention.

When I told him that one of my accusers had lost his

job for trafficking in convict supplies he replied frankly that it wasn't surprising, but rather what he'd expect, judging from the conduct of the guards he'd seen traveling on his ship.

Back in his office he gave my loud accusers the answer they least expected! "This man's papers are in form. Next time, if you please, before making such serious accusations make sure of your facts," he told them shortly.

"But he *is* an *évadé*, and his papers are false!" exclaimed the guard from the Islands. "Last year we had him in solitary confinement for attempting to escape!"

"I'll be having *you* arrested if you don't watch your words!" I said heatedly.

The three looked at me speechless. The Purser exclaimed curtly, "The matter is closed, gentlemen!" And they sullenly filed out of the office.

The Purser's attitude toward them is indicative of the deplorable reputation of Guiana guards outside the prison colony. When they go on leave they try to conceal their true identity, and, in answer to questions about what they do, reply that they are in the Colonial Service. Even the underworld of France has no use for them, and calls them *chiourmes*, an old word for guard.

That night in the dining room, just to annoy the guards who sat near me, I ordered the *garçon* to bring me a half bottle of the best champagne on the ship's wine list! Their eyes looked daggers at me! This was

the sole extravagance I was to allow myself; and it gave me much pleasure to revenge myself a bit on the hateful *chiourmes*.

Next morning we reached Martinique, where they got off. I was to learn later that they cabled, at their own expense, to Governor Siadous in Cayenne to tell him that I was discovered aboard the *Pérou*. I don't know exactly what answer they received, but I am certain it was something they didn't expect!

We were now steaming through the light blue Caribbean, with the mountains of Venezuela in full view in the distance. Toward mid-afternoon we passed a small craft. It was about a mile away, fighting doggedly against the current. The passengers pointed it out to each other, while some followed it with their spy glasses. I knew what the little craft was long before I heard one of the officers say: "They are men from Devil's Island. We see the *évadés* very often on this run."

While I watched the tiny bark bobbing on the waves, I tried to recollect the names of those convicts who had escaped in the preceding weeks. Soon they would land. And as I gazed at them, dropping astern now, I wished them luck—for theirs was a desperate adventure!

By the time we reached La Guayra my situation was generally known all over the ship. To my fellow passengers I had become a curiosity. Some asked permission to take my picture. The Purser had interested himself in me, and knew enough about me to answer questions with a good story. But when we docked, eventually, in the

Venezuelan port the authorities refused to allow me to land! Although my passport was in order and I had all the necessary papers, there was no getting off the ship. The Purser once more came to my rescue. He took my passport ashore, himself, and had it visa'd for Panama. There was nothing for me to do but pay the additional passenger fare and continue to Cristobal, in the Canal Zone, the next port of call.

It was the 12th of December, 1930, when we docked. As we filed past the Canal Zone Immigration Officials my heart was in my mouth. Would they let me pass, and land on American soil! My turn came and I gave the man at the table my passport. The Purser exchanged a few words with him. After a while the agent of the French Line told me I could go ashore, but that I must present myself for examination in the morning.

Early next day I was in the Immigration Offices. The agent of the French Line acted as interpreter. I told the authorities all they wanted to know. After much deliberation I was authorized to stay, but I was warned that if within a month I had not found work, I would be shipped back to Martinique and the one hundred dollar deposit which I had been required to make would be used to pay my passage.

That very night I took the smoky little train to Panama City. I now had about three hundred dollars in my pocket. That was a fortune! I was still a rich man! Every morning I would leave my hotel and go walking through the town. I was not looking for work. Unable to speak

the language, not knowing any manual trade, what work could I do? I was utterly lost. I had just existed through nine years where life, such as it was, had been provided for. I kept telling myself: "Everything will be all right."

I searched continuously for French people. At the end of a few days an idea suddenly came to me, and I was surprised that I had not thought of it before. The red light district! In Panama City's famed *barrio* I could find French women!

After darkness had set in I found my way to the *barrio*, on the borderline between Panama and the Canal Zone. In this part of town the *filles de joie* (prostitutes), are free to exercise their luckless profession. And Panama, Crossroads of the World, has a red light district second only to Singapore. In dives where blue black Jamaica negroes strum hot rumbas, men from the four corners of the earth dance with heavily painted and perfumed women whose hair hangs loose down their bare backs, and drink through the long hours of the night. In the long narrow streets I saw women, white, yellow, chocolate-colored, in low-cut negligees and loud kimonos, sitting in the open doors of their rooms beckoning to passing customers.

Picking one at random, I asked her: "Where can I find a French girl?"

"French girl!" She replied soothingly in improvised broken French. "I'm a French girl . . . from Marseilles!" And she gave me a warm smile.

Her pretense amused me. "*Non, une française de France!*—A French girl from France!" I insisted. And I added dryly: "It's serious business."

She seemed to understand that I wasn't walking the streets of colorful kimonos for anything she could offer me. She pointed out a woman sitting before a doorway across the street. "She over there, she's a French girl."

"*Merci!*" I called back and crossed the street.

"Are you French?" I asked the shapely, dark-haired girl she'd pointed out.

"*Mais oui?*—Yes. Why?"

"I have just arrived in town," I said. "Can you tell me where I can find Frenchmen?"

"You have just arrived in Panama—from France?" she asked pointedly.

"*Non, de là-bas*—No, from 'over there'," I said, meaning Guiana.

"*De là-bas!*" she replied. "Come inside!

"You've just come from over there?" she asked with interest.

"Yes."

"*Évadé?*"

"Yes," I said to avoid explanation.

"How many years were you in Guiana?"

"Nine."

"Nine years," she repeated. "Then you must have known Julot Huignard?"

"Yes, I knew him well."

"Just a year ago Julot was here in Panama. I saw him often. But he wanted to see France and went back, and got himself arrested again!" She sighed.

"Yes, I read about it in the newspapers," I said.

She directed me to a café where she said I would find Frenchmen from "là-bas." Still thinking I was an *évadé* and knowing I would be destitute, she tried to give me some money, which I refused to take, but thanked her.

Then I went off in search of the café. As I picked my way down the narrow, dark streets of Panama City, winding through the lush, warm night, I was thinking of Julot Huignard, known in the Paris underworld as "*L'homme au marteau*" (the hammer man), who was arrested in 1921, the same year as myself! We made the crossing together in the same cage. Headlines in Paris for his last robbery! He picked the largest jewelry shop on the boulevards, just as it was opening its doors in the morning. He crashed the glass with his hammer, an accomplice picked up the trays of stones, their car roared down the boulevard! That one haul got them 300,000 francs! Julot was arrested three months later. He refused to talk . . . got twenty years in Guiana!

He didn't count on staying long in Guiana. He said his accomplice would send him money to escape. But he didn't; he ignored all promises, trusting that Julot would die in Guiana! How Julot used to rage at the treacherous hound! Then in 1927 he escaped—it had taken him six long years to save up the money to buy his place in the dugout!

It went very hard with him in Venezuela—so he made his way to Colombia, Panama. He finally got back into France! We heard in the Penal Colony how he had shot his accomplice in revenge for his treachery. But Julot was out of luck. The police caught him—and in 1931 back he came again.

Once more, however, a few weeks after his second arrival he escaped, and is now somewhere or other in South America.

Through the hot night, and the crowded, smelly streets, I finally threaded my way to the café. I asked the negro barman in a faded blue undershirt if he could point me out a Frenchman. He pointed his sweaty hand to a man sitting with a girl at a small table.

"Over there! Rudolph, he is French," he said.

I approached the table. "Excuse me, Rudolph," I said. "Can I talk to you a minute?"

The man stood up. "*Mais oui,*" he said. "What do you want?"

"I'm a friend of Julot's," I said. "From *là-bas*."

"Friend of Julot's! When did you get here?" He drew up a chair for me. A third man from Guiana joined us as we sat over our beers. "He's a friend of Julot's, too!" Rudolph said to me.

The girl with Rudolph was very pretty. After a while he suggested that we all go for a ride. In his shiny, big car he drove us round Old Panama. We stopped at a night club which was brightly lit with colored lights. They told me it was run by a Frenchwoman. They

wanted to show me a good time to take my mind off my troubles, but after a few glasses of beer I asked them to drop me off at my room.

Rudolph made an enormous amount of money from a bootleg lottery which he operated in Panama City. He had a heart of gold. All the *évadés* who passed through Panama had been befriended by him. Son of a native of Martinique and brought up in Panama, the only Frenchmen he had known were the *évadés*. He had once had the luck to win a ten-thousand-dollar grand prize in the national lottery, and with this capital he started his own lottery. This netted him something like a thousand dollars a week.

I had written some letters to Mrs. Blair Niles in New York and to other friends, telling them of my good fortune and of my being in Panama. Weeks went by and I received no answers. I spoke about it to Rudolph.

"We have no mailmen here," he said. "You have to go get your letters yourself at the post office!"

We went to the General Delivery window. There was a letter from Governor Burgess of the Panama Canal, instructing me to report to one of the government offices. Mrs. Niles had written in my behalf to the Canal Zone authorities. I was asked what sort of work I could do. I said I would be grateful for anything.

I was given work as a gardener. Many flowers are grown for patients on the grounds of the spotless great white Gorgas Hospital on Balboa Heights. Working

outdoors in a garden was pleasant and restful. I earned a dollar sixty a day, which was just enough to make ends meet. In the meantime I was making progress with Spanish and I hoped with some degree of confidence that in time I would find a better job.

Chapter V

Old Friends—The Case of Leclerc—Mourey's Way with a Traitor—An Invitation to Join in a Bank Robbery

EVERY Sunday I used to meet Rudolph, and together we'd go and spend the evening at the *Rio Abajo* in the company of Madame Paulette, its proprietress. Her night club on the road to Old Panama was doing a thriving business, and there were many Americans from the Canal Zone to be seen there.

One Sunday morning Rudolph came for me in his car. Madame Paulette had sent word that there were three or four Frenchmen from Colon who wanted to see me. To me that could mean but one thing—they were *évadés!* And probably just come from Guiana!

When we arrived at the *Rio Abajo* I was taken aback to find three aces from the prison colony—Bébé Mourey and Raymond who had escaped together four years back, and Castelli who escaped in 1927. Bébé introduced me to a fourth man with them, Leclerc.

Leclerc? . . . Suddenly I recognized him. Eight years ago!

"You don't remember me?" I asked him.

"No," he replied.

"Saint Martin de Ré, 1923! Have you forgotten? I wrote your letters for you to your lawyer!"

"It's been a long time!" declared Leclerc. "Eight years of punishment cells and labor camps have made you another man."

After lunch, Leclerc left us to return to Colon on the afternoon train to meet his wife.

"Do you know his case?" I asked the others.

"Vaguely," said Mourey. "I know he escaped, was later pardoned and that he now has a pretty good job in Venezuela."

"It's a fantastic story," I continued. "Early in 1906 the police on night duty around the central market of Paris, stumbled on the body of a man knifed to death! In the morgue they identified the body as that of *le Bicot du Montparno* (the Arab of Montparnasse), a notorious trafficker in white slaves who'd been picked up by the police more than once.

"*Vengeance d'apaches!* the police declared. They boiled their hunt down to the dives and cafés of the neighborhood, which were frequented by the apaches and women-mongers. One night they arrested a man named Sauvage, and in spite of his denials, jailed him, because he had been seen in a violent quarrel with the murdered man a few hours before the body was discovered.

"He was put in a cell at the Santé with this Leclerc, who was in for robbery. They fell to talking. And one

day Sauvage made him this strange proposition: 'Do you want to confess to the murder of the Arab?'

" 'What are you talking about!' said the astonished Leclerc. 'Get a murder sentence instead of one for robbery?'

" 'Sure, you'd be better off!' Sauvage retorted. 'You'll get four to five years in a central prison for your robbery. That's the dark cell, and dry bread, and it's cold in winter—and you don't escape! But if you'll confess to the murder they'll sentence you to the same number of years at hard labor in Guiana. And from there you know you can escape. I'll see that you get tobacco every week, and a *plan* * with 500 francs! With that you can escape soon as you land in Guiana, and a year from now you'll be free!'

"Leclerc set himself to thinking. The strange offer was tempting! What if he did have to admit murder! Five years in the somber city prisons for robbery was no joke. In Guiana, now, it was another thing, he had heard.

"Leclerc accepted. Sauvage then told him the whole murder in detail, and that same day Leclerc wrote a letter to the courts, confessing he had knifed the Arab because he was afraid of him.

"Sauvage was set free and kept his promise. Every

* A *plan*, as it is known in French criminal jargon, is a suppository, about three inches long, and three fourths of an inch in diameter. This hollow cylinder is divided in the middle and held together by screwing one end into the other. In this smooth container, concealed by inserting it into the anus, convicts carry their money and other articles of small size which are of value to them.

week he sent Leclerc some tobacco, and even a little money to help out with extra food on the prison ration. He even paid his lawyer.

"Leclerc got sentenced to six years at hard labor for murder and was put on the convict ship! When his lawyer came to see him for the last time, he slipped him the *plan* filled with tightly rolled 100 franc notes. And three months after he got off the convict ship at Saint Laurent, he escaped with seven others and safely reached Venezuela!

"Just after the escape the Director received a cable from the Ministry of Justice in Paris. *Return Leclerc by first boat. Innocent.* Sauvage, betrayed by a jealous mistress had been rearrested and had confessed to the murder.

"Meanwhile, Leclerc had passed from the headwaters of the Orinoco, where he dug in the gold mines, to Caracas, the capital. He found work washing dishes in a large hotel. A hard worker, with a good head on him, he kept on getting promoted and in three years he was the manager!

"Among the guests in his hotel was a former General who'd been ruined by a revolution. Leclerc served him well, and when he became manager he extended him credit. And what do you think! There was another overnight revolution and the General got back his lost rank and power, and made Leclerc head of the Health Department of Caracas, capital of Venezuela!

"The War news in 1914," I went on, "excited his

patriotism. Leclerc went back to France. At the front he was badly wounded twice, won the *Médaille Militaire,* and the *Croix de Guerre* with three citations for bravery. When the excitement was over he remembered sadly that he was still a fugitive. He went back to Venezuela where he had known safety and was somebody. The population received him as a hero, and he got back his position as head of the Health Department!

"One day when he was walking about town a man called out his name. It was an *évadé* who'd known him in Guiana—ten years back!

"Leclerc took him to his house, gave him clothes and money, and got him a job in the hotel where he himself had worked. But his 'protégé' skipped with the hotelkeeper's pocketbook!

"This *évadé* visited Leclerc again after a while to touch him for a loan. . . ." Three pairs of hard eyes looked up at me expectantly. "No! He didn't kill him!" I said. "Leclerc just kicked him out, and he went off muttering he'd get even. And he did!

"About this time Leclerc went off to Paris as companion to a rich physician of Caracas. He was sitting in his room, one afternoon, at the Hotel Lutetia on the Boulevard Raspail, when the police came in and arrested him! And that very night he was back in the Santé prison, where fifteen years before Sauvage had persuaded him to plead guilty to the murder of the Arab."

"Betrayed, eh?" Raymond spoke up.

"Yes, that scum of an *évadé* had sent an anonymous

letter to the Chief of Police of Caracas denouncing Leclerc as an escaped convict.

"The Chief wouldn't believe Leclerc was an *évadé!* But for his own satisfaction he had to find out the truth. Leclerc was away, and the Chief of Police couldn't find any record that he was born in the country. So he sent a report to the Venezuelan Consul in Paris!

"The courts dug up Leclerc's confession that he'd killed the Arab fifteen years before. And the first thing Leclerc knew, he was in Saint Martin de Ré, waiting for the convict ship to take him back to Guiana.

"That was in 1922—when I was there! But before the ship sailed his lawyer dug up the fact that Sauvage had been denounced by his jealous mistress! Sauvage had confessed the truth, that *he* was the murderer. And he had been sent to Guiana, himself, to do ten years at hard labor!

"Leclerc had never known about Sauvage's arrest. Now he was innocent before the law! He could live where he pleased without fear! But he decided to go back to Caracas, and the same press that had denounced him, made him a hero! And he resumed his old job as head of the Health Department of the capital city!"

"It's fantastic!" exclaimed Castelli. "An *évadé*—and he's now a big shot in Venezuela, with several hundred thousand bolivars in the bank!"

"Yes," agreed Mourey, "life is strange. Look at 'Milo les Belles Dents' and his soft job? They sent him to

Guiana on a life term for murder, and now he's a lieutenant of police down in Peru!"

"And Marcheras—remember Marcheras!" Mourey went on. "He was one of those Paris apaches. The Paris courts condemned him to Guiana for life; but he escaped from there to Mexico, where he was sentenced to death because he took an active part in a revolution. But he got away! He went to Cuba. He got twenty years for a robbery there. But they couldn't hold him, either! In all, he was caught three times in France, each time for a new crime, and sent to Guiana. But he escaped every time!"

"I didn't see him there!" I interrupted.

"There! No—he's spending his old days in peace as a servant of the Christian Fathers in Barranquilla. The Paris newspapermen always drop in to see him for a story when they are passing through."

"Life's queer—very queer!" continued Mourey, looking at me. "Only four years ago in Saint Laurent you did me a real turn, tipping me off to Dumont's plot to get my jewels, and now here I find you in Panama, working in the Canal Zone!"

"What was that about a plot to get your jewels?" asked Castelli.

"Belbenoit, here," he cried, slapping me on the back, "did me a swell turn in Saint Laurent. He was a fellow who put me on to the plot to steal my jewels!" And he proceeded to tell Castelli and brawny, tattooed Raymond all about it.

"When I left France in the convict ship," said Mourey, "I still had with me, in my *plan*, sixteen of the Shattuck stones worth some $15,000.

"Well, down there in the damned holds of the *Martinière*, I took dysentery from the stale food. They all knew in the cage I had taken those jewels, and I didn't want to let any knifing *fort-à-bras* corner me alone, and take my *plan* away from me! So I decided I'd slip it to Dumont—who was my friend.

"When I got to Guiana, at first, they put me on the Islands. After a year and a half, I was sent to Saint Laurent. I sold a diamond for cash to a Chinaman, for escape money. The yellow cur tried to cheat me out of half the price!

"Then, one morning, I was unexpectedly called up for medical inspection. Now, I hadn't reported sick. 'Something's wrong!' I said to myself. 'Maybe the Administration has found out I'm getting up an escape, and is inventing a reason to send me back to the Islands!'

"It never occurred to me for a minute that my jewels had anything to do with it. For since I had trusted Dumont on the convict ship almost two years before, my heavy *plan* had never once passed out of my hands. I was waiting my turn to go before the doctor, when Belbenoit here, who was bookkeeper for the hospital, whispered to me: 'Know why you're seeing the doctor?'

" 'Guess they're going to send me back to the Islands!' I told him.

" 'No, they're after your diamonds!'

"I looked Belbenoit in the eye. 'Who told you that?' I demanded. Then he said that the night before he had overheard the hospital attendant and the doctor talking. They'd repeated the word *plan* and my name several times.

" 'Who's that attendant?' I asked Belbenoit.

" 'Dumont.'

"I understood right away. The *Martinière*, my *plan* . . . it all returned to me in a flash! I knew I was in a dangerous trap.

"I gave Belbenoit my *plan*, and when they let me go, he gave it back to me. And not a diamond was missing!"

Castelli nodded approvingly. "Well," he laughed loudly, "I guess the doctor figured you didn't have a *plan*, after all."

Mourey resumed: "Eight days later I was paddling down the Maroni, off to freedom, with Dumont and five others."

"But, Mourey," I asked, "*why* did you take Dumont with you? I could never understand that!"

A hard smile crept over Mourey's face. "You were in the dugout, too, Raymond—tell Belbenoit what happened."

"I guess we fellows had about the easiest escape ever made!" Raymond began. "Not a storm! We hadn't quarreled once! We had plenty of food and water! On the twenty-first day we saw the mountains of Colombia. We were all in high spirits, especially Dumont, who spoke Spanish fluently, had some money and was going to get

more from his family, and who seemed to have the best chance of all of us to make a success in South America. And then it happened!"

Raymond looked over at Mourey and there was a dead silence.

"Well, it was a terrible scene," said Raymond, with a short nervous laugh. "Dumont was pointing to the shore, and laughing. In less than an hour we would be on dry land!

"Suddenly Mourey called out: 'Lower the sail!'

" 'Not yet, we're too far out,' the steersman objected.

" 'Lower that sail!' The sail came down, while we all looked at him in a tense silence. The dugout slowed down, turned sideways and began rocking in the shore swell. The sharks which had been following caught up and swam all around us, their dark fins cutting the water.

"Suddenly Mourey said: 'When we get to shore, we must split up—to avoid suspicion. Three of us will start off east, and the other three west.'

" 'But there're seven of us!" we protested.

"Mourey just looked at us with a strange expression on his face and smiled grimly. Turning to Biribi, the steersman, he suddenly shot a question at him:

" 'Have you anything on your conscience, Biribi?'

" 'What! On my conscience? What are you talking about, Bébé (Mourey)?' grunted Biribi, who was anything but an angel.

" 'I am just asking you if you have anything on your conscience,' Bébé repeated.

" 'No,' said Biribi shortly.

" 'What about you, Gégène,' he asked.

" 'Not me, Bébé. I never injured you in any way,' answered Gégène, obviously puzzled.

"Georgette answered the same question in the same way.

"Then came the turn of Dumont, who was seated facing Mourey in the body of the canoe.

" 'And you, Dumont?'

" 'Me? Certainly nothing,' said Dumont in a self-satisfied voice.

"At this answer Bébé took a sheath knife from his pocket while he hissed an unprintable epithet, and bringing his face close to Dumont's he asked sternly:

" 'And what about the story of my *plan* and the *toubib* (doctor)?'

"All the color drained out of Dumont's face at the words. He understood instantly that vengeance for his treachery had overtaken him, and he stammered in a trembling voice: 'I don't know what you mean, Bébé!'

" 'You don't know what I mean? You really think that I don't know that you conspired with the doctor to get hold of my *plan* before I left the prison?'

"Then he went on, pointing his finger at the beach which was now not more than a couple of miles from us:

" 'Look over there, Dumont! There is life! There is liberty! There is a future! Money! Women! But *you*, Dumont, *you* will never see it, for you are going to die *here*.'

"Pushing the point of his sheath knife into the skin of Dumont's side, he shouted:

" 'Overboard with you! Overboard!'

"Dumont tried to resist but Bébé pushed the point of his knife into his flesh harder and harder, until Dumont, unable to bear the pain, backed up violently against the side of the dugout, tipping the boat down so that the rest of us had hurriedly to cling to its other side to keep it from upsetting.

"Bébé simply continued to push the blade harder into Dumont's body, shouting:

" 'Overboard, you coward! *Overboard!*'

"Dumont pulled himself up to his feet and we could see the blood streaming from his wound. Bébé, at the same second, gave him a terrific blow and knocked him clear into the sea, as the dugout gave a terrific lurch which nearly overturned it. Dumont, with his lungs half full of water, rose to the surface, splashing, gave a horrible, bubbling scream and made a desperate effort to cling to the edge of the dugout, but Bébé cut him hard across the knuckles of his clutching fingers and the doomed man lost his grip and submerged once more.

" 'Take those paddles and let's get away from here!' ordered Mourey; and struck dumb by this swift act of bloody vengeance we did as he told us without a word. The canoe began to move. Dumont screamed again. Dark fins cut the water around about him. There was one last awful cry, and the boiling of the water where he had been, and then silence.

" 'He earned that!' Mourey said in a cold voice as he turned from watching the place where the doomed man had gone under. And that was Dumont's only epitaph.

" 'Now we'll toss up to see which of us will go west, and which east,' and pulling a 5-cent piece from his pocket he spun it in the air. . . ."

"Where are those jewels now, Mourey?" I asked simply.

Mourey withdrew his tiepin from his cravat and passed it to me. "This is all that's left, this black pearl," he said. "And I'll never sell it. It's my good luck piece!"

The way Mourey had originally come into possession of the Shattuck jewels is characteristic of the man.

Mourey was a Parisian. He was only eighteen years old when he was condemned to seven years at hard labor in Guiana. Soon after he became a *libéré*, he escaped and got into the United States on a forged passport. In New York, in 1919, he was a butler in the home of Mr. Shattuck, owner of the Schrafft's Restaurants. Two months later Mourey vanished from the wealthy Shattuck home at 19 Washington Square North, taking with him several thousand dollars' worth of fine jewels.

Three years later, back in Paris, Mourey found his resources running low. He knew the rich Shattuck household like a book, even to where they kept their great fortune in jewels! He picked three of his friends,

and set off to New York to make another haul. This time he'd get *all* the jewels!

On the 2nd of April, 1922, at four o'clock in the morning, Mourey, with three accomplices entered the Shattuck house through a coal chute. They hid in the cellar until noon, when, Mourey knew, the eight servants would be eating in the kitchen, and Mr. and Mrs. Shattuck would be upstairs. At the point of their guns the four backed Mr. and Mrs. Shattuck and all the servants into the basement, and locked them in a small wine cellar. Then they went to work!

Mr. Shattuck, realizing the danger of suffocation, started immediately to unscrew the cellar lock with his small penknife. When the blade broke, he worked feverishly with a thin dime for a whole hour. Mrs. Shattuck and one of the maids were overcome before he could get the door open! Finally, they all stumbled upstairs, only to find Mourey and his companions still there! One of the servants managed to throw up a window and call for help.

It was midday in the heart of New York, and the cops closed in on all sides. One of Mourey's friends was caught a few hundred yards from the house. He had $25,000 worth of jewels in his pocket! A few weeks later, the two other accomplices, Bagnoli and Eugène Diasset, were arrested. Only Mourey had escaped—with $100,000 worth of Mrs. Shattuck's personal jewelry.

She had recognized the voice of her former butler,

and this verified the information gotten out of his accomplices, who had squealed. A reward of $10,000 was offered for Mourey's arrest! Mr. Shattuck immediately called in the Pinkerton Agency to find Mourey. If necessary, he declared, he'd spend half his fortune to get back his wife's jewels! The Pinkerton detectives found Mourey two years later—back in Paris again! He was arrested, and condemned to hard labor for life. While he waited for the convict ship at Saint Martin de Ré, two of Mr. Shattuck's representatives came to his cell and promised him that, if he would give back the jewels, Mr. Shattuck would help him get a quick pardon. But Mourey insolently shrugged his shoulders, and replied, "I can take care of myself!"

"Say, Belbenoit, how much are you earning in the Zone?" Castelli asked me one evening when the four of us were at the Rio Abajo together.

"Forty dollars a month."

"Forty! With that you can't even bet on a horse at the race-track!"

"No, but I've got lots of patience. Maybe some day I can get a better job!"

Castelli looked at the others . . . Mourey nodded slightly, and said: "Go ahead, we can trust him!" Raymond drew up his chair closer to the table leaning both tattooed elbows on it.

Castelli glanced around the room for a possible eavesdropper. Then he said to me: "René, we've got some-

thing even better here than that haul of Mourey's in New York. It's a walk-away . . . in Colon over on the other side! Want to join us?"

Without waiting for me to answer him, he continued: "We want to let you in! Mourey here thought it would be a good idea.

"Look! Here's the set-up. I have an apartment on the ground floor of a house. On the other side of the street is the National Bank of Panama. We've checked every detail of the situation, René! The blowtorch has just come in on the boat from France. I sent to Paris to get the kind I worked with on my big jobs on the Continent. We've got the electric drill, too!

"Tomorrow we start the job, René. First, a tunnel under the street from our apartment! Mourey got the layout of the bank—we've charted the exact position of the vaults, and in five days the tunnel will come out right in them!" Castelli's eyes were gleaming with anticipation. "That'll give me Saturday afternoon to Sunday night when the bank's shut—all the time I need to work on the safes with the torch! We've come to get you to be the fourth man," he confided. "Then we can work two and two all twenty-four hours, double shift, making the tunnel!"

"It's a set-up," Mourey broke in earnestly. "I've studied it from all angles, myself. And you know Castelli, how he works! There isn't a safe in America that can stop him! The tunnel to the vaults is a simple thing. Just hard digging with the drill! And the apartment is

big enough to pile the dirt in. We've put about a thousand dollars in this already, what with buying the torch and leasing the place and all! What do you say?"

I was in a tight spot. Very suddenly this had ceased to be a meeting of old friends—of *évadés* finding solace in each other's company, distant from the Hell of Guiana! I had to think, and think fast. And I couldn't afford to queer myself with them then!

"Tomorrow morning I'll give you my answer," I said. I knew by the way they looked at me that they expected me to say "yes!" For Guiana leaves all men of that type, once free, feeling that the world owes them a living. The confirmed criminal looks upon his dangerous profession as legitimate, and feels no obligation to society or civilization. To them I was just another *évadé*, and an outcast from society.

"But there's no risk in it for you, René!" Mourey exclaimed, trying to press me in. "Look—you're making just forty dollars a month, and working with blacks. You're worse off than in Guiana, by God! And this is a job going to haul fifteen or twenty thousand dollars for each of us! It's a scoop—a clean-up!" And he added: "And no risk. For even if there's a slip, we've nothing to fear from the police! Everything's been taken care of. But that's for tomorrow—we'll explain all that to you then."

I paced the floor of my room many hours that night, trying to think of the best way to tell them "no." I knew

all about Castelli. If he could get at those vaults, the robbery would be a walk away, all right. He was known in the underworld as the most accomplished professional burglar in France, an ace acetylene torch operator. The Paris courts had sentenced him in 1926 for a burglary amounting to several million francs, in one of the main post offices. Sent to Devil's Island, he escaped a few weeks after he arrived! A Chinaman got everything together for him. I would have escaped with him myself; but all the places in the dugout had been taken, and the money pooled, and to freeze out any one man then would have meant certain trouble! In 1929 I heard he made a successful haul in Colombia, in which he took fifty thousand pesos worth of jewels from the Volpe jeweler's shop in Barranquilla.

I was pretty well convinced of the fact that if he took a hand in this attack on the Bank of Panama, with a thousand dollars spent in the preparations, it was because he had a sure chance to succeed. And particularly with Mourey for partner! But, how was I going to tell them my personal decision—which was "no." I had thought of Governor Siadous and of Mrs. Blair Niles. How could I betray their confidence! I had the answer now for Castelli. He and Mourey came next morning. I frankly gave them the reasons why I was refusing their offer. They were surprised, of course. Neither one had ever heard of a parole from Guiana!

"If you'd had other reasons for not joining up with us, I'd still try hard to persuade you, René," Mourey

said. "But that—*gratitude*, it's one thing all our sort understands. I'm sorry, though! I wanted to pay back that good turn you did me in Saint Laurent!"

"After all, maybe you're right about the whole thing," Castelli remarked. "But, see here, René—don't think that crime doesn't pay!" he added defensively. "Crime pays—it's maybe the best of the professions! But, it has to be learned like any other, and, unfortunately, it's the hardest one to master. It comes in jumps, while the others are learned little by little.

"In crime, your very first lesson may cost you several years in the hoosegow, the second even more, the third more again, and by the time you are really getting to know your job you find out you're too old to work at it!

"Look at me—I'm 57. I began by stealing bicycles left before street-doors. Later I took to lifting bigger and more valuable things, and finally specialized in torch-work. Now I can open up any bank-vault that's ever been built, but it's cost me 14 years in the cooler to learn how.

"Now, of course, it's too late to try anything else. Anyhow, I'm an *évadé*, and what's one crime more or less!

"But I will say that if I had my time over again I think I'd choose some other job, seeing a man has to waste the best years of his life in learning this one."

Mourey offered me a cigarette and lit it for me. "Well, Castelli, Belbenoit knows what he's doing!" he said.

We had a round of rum in a café on Main Street, down over near the station. They went off to Colon. And I went on my way to my work in the Gorgas hospital garden.

The following Monday, exactly a week later, on the front page the papers announced the arrest of Castelli! Mourey and Raymond were not mentioned—they had escaped clean! The papers said that, very late Saturday night the night watchman at the bank heard the muffled staccato drumming of Castelli's electric drill.

I learned later that, egged on by the fact that they were only inches below the floor of the vault, they had hurried ahead, not realizing that traffic had stopped and the city was very still.

Three days later, Castelli was freed on a $1,000 bail. He immediately slipped the police and left Panama. Not many months later, he was arrested in Colombia, attempting a similar job in Cali! This time he was sent back to Guiana.

When I think back on those uncertain days in Panama I remember what he said to me: "But see here, René—crime pays!" In spite of his twenty-five years' experience, he hasn't proved yet that "crime pays." He was then fifty-seven. And I wonder if he's gotten too old to try again. At this moment he's still in Guiana! Perhaps he's not too old at all—but is quietly biding his time.

Chapter VI

Career of Antoine le Zouave—The White Slave Ring

MONTHS went by. I heard from Guiana that Governor Siadous had been appointed to another post and had left the Colony, much regretted by the wretched convicts whose desperate lot he had spared no effort to better. The Governor who had come to take his place was a *Gouverneur administratif*—as the condemned call the colonial executives who walk hand in hand with the prison Administration. Nevertheless, I wrote to the new Governor for an extension of my leave of absence. I never received a reply.

I was the first paroled *libéré* from French Guiana. My case had been an experiment. Governor Siadous had discovered in the archives of the Administration that a governor of New Caledonia, the former Penal Colony, had granted authorization to one *libéré* to leave that colony for the period of one year to live in Australia. Availing himself of this precedent, Governor Siadous had authorized me to leave Guiana. His intention was to extend this boon to other *libérés* besides myself. But there were only three other *libérés* out of the more than

one thousand in Guiana who had the necessary funds to make them eligible. If I didn't keep my word of honor to Governor Siadous it might bring high disfavor on him and end paroles for the wretched *libérés* for all time.

At this time of uncertainty I met an American newspaperman who was visiting Panama. His interest in the wretched conditions at Guiana was keen, and he said, "My syndicate will pay you $1,000 cash for some articles on Devil's Island!" This looked like a fortune to me, as I had at the time less than ten dollars.

I went to see M. Langlais, French Chargé d'Affaires in Panama, for he understood my situation and had been very sympathetic. Though I needed money so badly, I had to agree with him that $1,000 was small pay for the risks I would run, for I could never hope to receive a full pardon if I exposed the shameful prison conditions which France allowed to exist in Guiana. He argued that to tell other nations, jealous of France's prestige and prosperity, would be unpatriotic. Of his own accord he wrote a testimonial stating that he had witnessed my refusal to write the articles. He proposed also that he write officially to the Minister of Justice in Paris, recommending me strongly for a full pardon. So I refused the offer.

While I worked every day with the jovial negro gardeners in the grounds of the Gorgas hospital, a Frenchman entered the hospital with appendicitis, in April, 1931. He learned about me from some of the attendants. He had an elaborate suite all to himself, and he called

me in to talk with him several times. He was an *évadé* who had escaped from Guiana twenty-nine years before, and was known to the underworld of numerous countries as Antoine le Zouave.

"If it was only to pull up weeds and look at flowers here in these gardens that you escaped," he remarked to me with open disdain, "you'd have done better to stay in Cayenne!"

He offered to lend me several thousand dollars when he got out of the hospital. For more than twenty-five years Antoine had been the brain-center, the king, of the white slavery racket in South America.

In 1902, Antoine le Zouave had been sent to Guiana, condemned to twenty years at hard labor for murder. A few weeks after he arrived in the Penal Colony he escaped from the main penitentiary at Cayenne with twelve other convicts, and made his way to Buenos Aires with several of his fellow fugitives. Immediately he wrote to his mistress back in Paris to come join him. After she arrived in the Argentine capital she continued her profession as a high-class prostitute. She had such unexpected success that, after a few months, she and Antoine sent for several of her friends to come to the Argentine capital. And, in Buenos Aires these soulless beautiful women exercised their worldly profession under Antoine's adroit supervision.

More friends were written to, and money was sent for their passage. Buenos Aires became a meeting place for *évadés*, who either had their own money or bor-

rowed it from Antoine to send for their women. Within a year there were some thirty Frenchwomen in Buenos Aires, working for Antoine's ring, and white slavery had been established there by these professional criminals of the underworld who'd escaped from the Penal Colony.

Two years after his arrival in Buenos Aires, Antoine was operating a house of prostitution with about fifteen Frenchwomen working for him. Other *évadés* went in for the highly lucrative business. From 1904 to 1924 several thousand women, most of whom were Frenchwomen, were brought to South America to be employed in prostitution. Since the *évadés* couldn't go to France themselves to collect their victims, they had these sent to them through intermediaries. A highly elaborate organization was created for finding women and young girls, with ramifications in the countries of western Europe and in Belgium, Spain and England. Many of these women, and frequently young girls who were under age, were sent off to South America unaware of the real fate which awaited them there, duped by the generous offers and the misrepresentations made to them by kindly-mannered purveyors. They were furnished with false passports. When the French authorities became aware of this traffic, and began to watch the ports, the ring embarked its white slaves from the ports of Bilbao, Barcelona, Vigo, Santander, Lisbon and Antwerp.

After ten years Antoine owned five great houses of prostitution in Buenos Aires. Since he couldn't go to

Europe to find new women for his business, he not only had them sent to him but also commissioned private purveyors, individuals who had no police records, to go to Europe and collect the cream of the crop, paying these individuals several thousand pesos for each woman brought to Argentina to work in his establishments.

The traffic of women in bondage to this white slavery ring of *évadés*, working with their associates in the European capitals, reached such international proportions that in 1923, twenty years after Antoine and his fellow fugitives began operations in Buenos Aires, the League of Nations appointed a special investigating committee to break up the ring's intercontinental operations in order to stamp out this major social plague which had reached even larger proportions than the notorious great narcotics rings. By 1927, statistics show, more than 6,000 Frenchwomen were living in the districts reserved for prostitution in the larger cities and ports of South America; and among the men who protected them and exploited them were hundreds of *évadés* who held most of the key positions. Everywhere . . . in Buenos Aires of Argentina; in Montevideo of Uruguay; in Rio, Bahia, Pernambuco and Para of Brazil; in Caracas of Venezuela; in Barranquilla and Cartagena of Colombia; in Colon and Panama City; in Havana; and in the larger ports on the Pacific coast, these fugitive criminals were the masters of the well-organized and highly lucrative vice-ring.

When the Argentine government eventually closed

the large houses of prostitution in Buenos Aires, and replaced them with the system of *casitas* where each woman has a single room to herself in which to receive individual visitors, Antoine, who had become enormously rich and was influential in the South American capital, obtained the exclusive right to locate the *casitas* and fill them with prostitutes. In two years, he told me, he amassed through this concession more than a million pesos!

"At the Aero Club which I founded in Buenos Aires," he told me one day at the Gorgas hospital when I was visiting him in his suite, "we had as members about sixty *évadés*. The Chief of Police of the city had several hundred photographs of *évadés* pasted up on the walls of police headquarters. But the police said nothing. We paid them off! Everything was all right until shooting began. Then in a few years more than a dozen of my friends were assassinated in Palermo, the resort near Buenos Aires. Every one of them was a Frenchman, and pretty soon real trouble started!"

Eventually Antoine was expelled from Argentina. After that, he moved from one great city of Central America and South America to another with a string of beautiful Frenchwomen, always able to earn a lavish living from their shame. His record even included a year's sojourn in the United States.

"Even up to ten years ago," Antoine told me while he lay in his suite at the Gorgas hospital, "every *évadé* from Devil's Island who landed in a big city in South

America, from Colon to Buenos Aires, was immediately given a helping hand by the white slavers. They'd lend him a woman or two for a few months just so that he could make enough money to get a start. And then, when he'd saved a little, he could buy one for himself! In Rio, in Caracas, in Colon, in Panama City, in Havana, in all the ports the *évadé* who arrived was sure of getting help and being able to make money. But today there are more difficulties—the business isn't so well organized. Polish women are replacing the 'Franchitas,' the Frenchwomen, who have always been the favorites with South Americans . . ."

He mentioned to me the names of *évadés* who were in control of the racket. Everywhere, in the coast cities between Argentina and Cristobal in the Canal Zone, and over on the Pacific side between Valparaiso and Panama City, these men made a good living from trafficking in white slavery. There were thousands of Frenchwomen working for them, and, in addition, there were Polish women—and still others, who were being received into their hands in increasing numbers. Their masters, whose connections ramified into all the underworlds of Europe, were one and all fugitives from the Penal Colony for whom this racket was safer and more lucrative than committing any robbery or violent crime!

And I understood why the French consul in Panama City had advised me unofficially not to let myself be seen too much with Frenchmen there. For everywhere in South America the French have earned themselves a

sinister reputation. To be a Frenchman, if one cannot show proper letters of recommendation, is to be thought a fugitive from Devil's Island or else a trafficker in white slaves. This generally accepted blot on France's honor is, unfortunately, all too well-founded on fact, because since the turn of the century the South and Central Americas have been infested by several thousand of these *évadés* and white slavers—all French.

In 1937, in just Panama and Colombia, nine *évadés* were doing a thriving business at white slavery. Each one had several women placed in Panama City, Colon and Barranquilla.

Antoine le Zouave died at the Gorgas hospital when complications set in after his operation for appendicitis, because he was so enormously fat. He was white-haired and at the age of sixty. He left a fortune of more than one million dollars—every cent of which had been amassed by white slavery . . . to his son who, at the time of his father's death, was finishing a medical course in one of the better known universities in the United States.

Chapter VII

Once More a Prisoner

IT WAS now October, 1931, and the deadline of my leave of absence from Guiana—November 12th—was close at hand. I could stay on in Panama, were I content to do so. But I wanted to be free to take my place among men again. If I stayed in Panama and did not return to Guiana by the appointed date, even though safe, I should be classed as a fugitive just like any other *évadé* hiding in the Americas. I had paid my debt to society, and now I would fight for my freedom. It was my just due!

Were I to go back to Guiana without the protection of Governor Siadous I should be a mere puppet in revengeful hands, and I could hope for no mercy. I was a *libéré*—no longer a convict, but a civilian. I made up my mind to report to the police in France instead of in Guiana. This would come within the terms of my parole and my promise to Governor Siadous.

I felt I had every justifiable reason to expect a full pardon—permanent freedom—and I thought that if I went to France I should have more hope of obtaining

it. I decided, therefore, to go to France at once. It was my one hope—to get there while I was still free to live outside Guiana.

I had excellent testimonials from the Gorgas hospital in the Canal Zone, showing that I had engaged in honest labor. I had been loyal to France in refusing to sell information abroad concerning Devil's Island. And another thing that gave me great hope, should I go direct to France, was a new law that all *libérés* were to be freed from enforced exile. *Doublage* * had been repealed by unanimous vote of the House of Deputies, as had happened four or five times before. This time I hoped with all my soul that it would be effectual. The black curtain which hung between me and full civilian rights seemed about to be torn aside.

On October 19th, 1931, I stowed away on the *Wyoming*, a boat of the French Line. It was the only ship going from the Canal Zone direct to Havre, so that I could not be put off at any intermediate point. The morning of the first day out I came out of my hiding-place, surrendered myself to the purser and told him candidly all about myself and my intentions.

We docked on November 2nd, ten days before my parole expired. I stayed on board and made the police come take me on the ship, so that I could not be charged with having been caught on land while attempting to

* *Note: Doublage:* The system by which a convict had to stay in Guiana as a *libéré* after his release from prison for a period as long as his original sentence, or for life, if his sentence was for eight years or more.

disappear in France. A few hours later I walked between policemen into the Havre jail!

I had surrendered myself voluntarily ten days before my freedom was up. At Havre, the Magistrate's Court sentenced me to two months in jail as a stowaway. I was held in jail while instructions were awaited from the Ministry of Justice in Paris.

I immediately sent my petition for a pardon to the Minister of Justice. Slowly the days dragged by. The cell was bitterly cold, but the guards, considering me a curiosity, were rather kind to me—I was so small and thin that I didn't seem real, or even dangerous. I was the first man from Guiana they had ever seen.

So the days and nights dragged on and became weeks. Any day now, this vile ten-year nightmare would end —my pardon would come. And I could walk out into the Paris sunshine and find an honest job! I felt so sure of my pardon that I was a resurrected man. Every time my cell-door opened my heart bounded with the expectation of the good news—I even slept happily at night.

One bleak afternoon—it was the last day of December—a key rattled in my cell door. "Office of the Warden!" the guard commanded.

As I went slowly down the iron staircase of the prison, emotion almost suffocated me—Should I be free and in Paris this very night, or should I—no, I could not dare to even think of *that—!*

In the office, as I stood trembling before his desk, the Warden, without a word, handed me the official docu-

ment containing my appeal for a pardon. Upon it, over a seal and a scrawled signature, was written the single word *Rejetée* (Rejected).

I turned and trudged heavily back to my cell behind the guard. I don't know how I lived through that horrible night.

A few days later I was transferred to the Central Prison of Beaulieu, one of the eight large prisons of France, any one of which would make Alcatraz seem a paradise by comparison. On arrival I was given thirty days in solitary confinement. The cell was in the freezing prison cellars. My feet were bare on the cold stone floor, I had only a tunic and trousers to wear, a blanket to sleep on at night.

Complete solitude, for prisoners are kept apart in individual cells. Every day each man has a half hour solitary walk in a small court. Twice a month his hair is close cropped. He never sees the other men, never speaks with another prisoner! He is never allowed to read, except on Sunday, when the guards pass out one book to each man, and that is usually minus pages in the best parts. He's not allowed to write. In the disciplinary quarters he is cuffed by guards and beaten by a *prévôt*, who is chosen for his duties from the most brutal of the prisoners. Such is the French idea of a perfect penal system!

I endured my thirty days in solitary confinement with resignation. The cell blocks on St. Joseph Island back in Guiana, where men went completely mad, were good

training for this that I was suffering now, but here the cold and damp were such that for fear of getting pneumonia I had to spend my days walking back and forth in my cell, with my blanket wound round my body to keep my blood circulating.

After my thirty days, I obtained permission to write to the Ministry of Justice. I had discovered I still had one more chance. The Chamber of Deputies had voted to abolish Devil's Island. There would be no more convoys to Guiana! Since I was a *libéré* they couldn't keep me locked up in a cell indefinitely. "I am a free man," I wrote, "I am not a convict. So why have I been put in a central prison?"

Within a week instructions came to transfer the *libéré* René Belbenoit to Saint Martin de Ré immediately.

My arrival there caused a great stir. Since 1921, over twelve thousand convicts had been sent from Saint Martin de Ré to Devil's Island. And out of this number only nine convicts had appeared again at Saint Martin, up to my return now in 1932. These had either been arrested in France, or had been extradited to France from foreign countries, to be sent back to Guiana. I was, therefore, the center of attention in the convict depôt. To the six hundred men gathered there I embodied the hero who had escaped from the Penal Colony—alive and in the actual flesh!—to prove that they could do it too!

Guards questioned me about the fate of convicts whom they had favored and helped out while they had

waited in the concentration depot for the convict ship to sail.

It was bitter for me to think of those men who had passed through there with me nine years before. I saw myself again as I was nine long years ago, seated on these same rough, hard benches dreaming, just as these men around me now were dreaming, of an early escape. Yes, it was easy—and I told them so. Easier than from any other large prison on earth! But what was hard for me to tell them was, that out of all of them there, fresh from the temperate zone and knowing nothing of the jungle, only a few would last out long enough to try. A few would, probably, escape immediately by sea in a dugout. These would be the select of Europe's underworld, with plenty of money and sharp wits—who would bribe their way through to freedom—like Mourey, like Castelli, like Huignard, and other big criminals.

Every man there, of the six hundred in the depôt, had his rosily painted future:—a prison where the sun smiled and escape was easy, new countries in which to begin life afresh, beckoning capitals glittering with diamonds and gold and exotic women, and—some day back to France—with papers in order!

Those dreams . . . ! Yes, it had all been done before! But Guiana would take a smashing toll as they walked into the gaping jaws of the "dry guillotine." Of the nearly seven hundred convicts who had arrived in Guiana with me on my first trip, there were only fifteen

still alive in the Colony when I was paroled seven years later. Many had escaped and were marked off the prison records as dead. Only three had ever seen France again!

Months slowly went by. My mother came to visit me—she had read in the newspapers that I was being held in Saint Martin.

I was so terribly changed she didn't know me. It was moving in many ways for me, for she had never written to me in Guiana. I learned now the sad news that my father had died. She told me that the press had started a campaign in my behalf, and that *Police Magazine* of Paris, the leading publication of its kind in the nation, had begun printing a series of my articles which I had sent to the editor from Guiana, and that I should not be returned to the Colony but would probably receive a free pardon.

I decided to follow up my second demand for a pardon by writing another plea to the Minister of Justice. I also addressed a petition to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, calling to his attention my action in Panama when I refused to sell information about Devil's Island prison colony to the American newspaper syndicate.

More weeks passed. One morning I was summoned to the office of the Director of the prison. He was one of those hard-boiled Corsicans, and had no sympathy for any of us prisoners at the Saint Martin depôt. Half expectant at heart of good news, I was wondering why I was wanted in his office.

He stared at me as I stood before him. "So! It's by

writing stuff like this in the papers that you think you can get a pardon, Belbenoit!" he shouted, shaking a copy of *Police Magazine* at me. Then he added: "Up to now you've had it easy here. But that'll stop! After today you'll be treated like any other convict!"

I soon felt the changes which he had threatened. For a week later I was in irons in one of the damp black cells of the disciplinary quarter, on dry bread and water for fifteen days!

My second petition for a pardon which I sent from the central prison of Beaulieu received the recommendation of President Lebrun of France, but was promptly rejected, probably because of the stories that were now being published under my name in *Police Magazine*, and over which I had no control.

I was to learn later that about this time Francis Carco, the great writer, had come to the depôt to see me, but the Director had not allowed him to talk with me. Here's what he says about it in his smashing book *La route du Bagne* (The Road to Devil's Island):

"Don't you have," I asked the Director, "a convict named Belbenoit?"

"Yes, there . . . Look, the sixth one in the line!"

The man walked with lowered head, and his hands were tightly clasped behind his back. He seemed puny and suffering. His uniform was too large, and he had had to turn the sleeves back.

"Well," the Director inquired of me laconically, "your impression?"

"I have none."

"All the better!" he said. "For, just between us, mine is none too high."

I saw no reason to argue. For that matter, my opinion, good or bad, would not have changed anything. Belbenoit was back in the rounds again and only he, at the price of a thousand strategies, could get himself out again. Five or six times he passed close to us in the stupefied line of walking men. He did not know that chance had brought us together there and, head lowered, his hands always behind his back, he walked mechanically around the court and around again without end, abused, washed out, drilled, overcome.

This encounter had moved me so much that I felt no desire to linger longer in the court. The Director followed me.

"This Belbenoit," I asked as I went out of the prison, "can't I see him at all in the visiting room?"

"Impossible!"

"I would like to."

The Director shook his head. "Access to the visiting room is prohibited. I'm sorry in your case, but the rules are rigid! All I can do is inform Belbenoit that you came to see him."

It's perhaps unnecessary to say that the Director never gave me the message; so I did not learn of Carco's visit until the publication of his book *La route du Bagne* which he was good enough to send me in Guiana.

Chapter VIII

The Convict Ship Again—My New Friend Lanio—Marchal's Experience

THE Ministry announced that the convoy for Guiana would be made up in September. In less than three weeks a thousand convicts were waiting. In the dormitory at night, I was pointed out to them as a parolee being sent back to Guiana. They overwhelmed me with questions. And as a result I was punished three times by confinement to my cell for sixteen days on bread and water, in chains every night.

I finally refused to answer questions. The officials were watching me carefully, and, I had no wish to die in the damp dungeons of the Island of Ré.

Among these new arrivals was the *libéré* Brabant, who had escaped from Guiana many years before. He had finished his term in Guiana in 1919, after doing five years at hard labor. He escaped with five other *libérés* and reached Venezuela after many hardships. For three years he worked in sugar plantations along the coast, and then mined gold in the hills. Then he made his way to Caracas where he met some other *évadés*, and together they set up a tailor shop. Brabant became the official tailor for the Army staff of President Gomez!

In 1928 he had himself naturalized as a Venezuelan, using French papers which he had bought from a native of Marseilles. Two years later he went to Panama, and there grew so homesick for France and his family that he went to France. What had he to fear! He had become a Venezuelan citizen, and it was thirteen years since he had left Guiana.

His passport was in due form, but when he tried to enter France the authorities asked him, "Did you serve in the War?" Brabant pointed out that even though he was born in France he was no longer French. When the police checked his supposed birthplace, they could find no records of the man from whom Brabant had bought his passport! Brabant's fingerprints were checked and that, of course, put the fat in the fire! So now here he was being sent back to Guiana on account of *doublage*, just as I was being sent myself.

"I'm fifty-five years old," he said to me hopelessly, "and *what* am I going to do in Guiana at my age?"

The only consolation I could give him was, "Your only hope is to escape again."

For a whole week before sailing, a glass of wine was generously distributed to every convict each day so that he might be in shape to stand the crossing. But the guards were the people who benefited thereby, since the men who were punished forfeited their glasses of wine. The guards became much stricter, and so many punishments were handed out that the forty guards got wine enough to be drunk every day!

Degars, a man from Marseilles, for whom his fellow townsmen in the depôt showed great admiration, came to ask me a last moment favor. He was being sent to Guiana for ten years for circulating counterfeit National Defense Bonds. His forgeries had amounted to over ten million francs!

"When it comes time to go on the ship," he said, "some pals of mine are coming alongside in a launch to pass me some money. It'll be a lot of cash—in an envelope! I've got to have it to escape with!

"Belbenoit, will you help me get it?" he said. "I think I can trust you, and you have been across before, and know the ropes when we are being loaded into the barge.

"The plan is very simple," he explained eagerly. "I just have to get to a spot at the side of the barge when we're being loaded, where I can reach out and grab the envelope quickly. If I can't get to the side, myself, he's to hand it to the man who's got his cap wrapped around his left hand! They'll be hustling us on the barge. In that crowded mob I maybe can't get to the side! Will you try to be at the side for me, just in case? Say to the man in the boat, "*Para qui!*" and show the cap in your left hand! I know I can trust you, Belbenoit. I'll give you a big cut if you'll help me out!" he said.

"I'm not the man you should pick for that job," I told him. "Every guard knows me, and they'll be watching every move I make!" And I told him to pick someone else.

It was the 20th of September, 1933. The *Martinière* was in the harbor. Exactly ten years before I had been put on that ship. I was being shipped again, like human cattle, under the same conditions. But I had been receiving my due punishment then—I was banished to Guiana to atone for a crime. But *today*, I was being banished to Guiana to face unjust charges of evading exile. It was because I had been too frank, because I had been too trusting in the justice of man.

Degars was near me. His roving, excited eyes were feverish with anxiety. He'd risk anything to get that money!

A crowd of hundreds watched our departure. The reporters were there, the newsreel photographers! The curious and idle of the town, grieving parents, sobbing wives—just as in 1923.*

At the gangway that led down into the barge, Degars whispered: "There's the launch! Now I've got to get to the rail!"

I was so intent on that launch that I didn't notice the Director of the prison, until he remarked sarcastically almost in my ear:

"Ah, Belbenoit, going back to the 'monkey country,' eh?"

As I glanced up quickly I saw at his side, wearing the rosette of the Legion of Honor, the distinguished French writer on crime, Francis Carco, who wasn't al-

* See "Dry Guillotine."

lowed to see me in the depôt. "Good luck, Belbenoit!" he called sympathetically as I passed by.

On the far side of the barge I saw Degars again, leaning on the rail.

"Look out there!" he said softly. "There they are!" A hundred yards from the barge a launch passed by, towing a small rowboat in which a man sat. I watched them drop the rowboat! In a few moments the man had rowed over to our crowded barge.

"Para qui!" Degars whispered. Their hands met for a second, and the rowboat pushed off into open water again. Degars slipped away among the milling convicts just as the guards hurried up. They searched a dozen or so of us, taking down numbers, threatening to throw us all into irons aboard the *Martinière*. But they resumed their posts on the loaded barge without having found a thing! And we steamed out to the convict ship, lying with steam up, and ominous great clouds of black smoke belching from her funnels.

Two hours later, her engines throbbing, the *Martinière* was rolling her way across the sea with her human cargo locked securely in her holds.

That was a long crossing. Twenty-one days of steaming slowly over the hot, calm, equatorial Atlantic to Guiana.

The men in our crowded cage down in the stifling hold of the *La Martinière* questioned me endlessly. How

tough was the work? How bad were the guards? How much sickness was there? . . . And escape—always *escape!* That's what they were all dreaming about, night and day in the fetid, steaming cages—herded in below decks like so many jackals, with about three square feet of space to each man.

The new convicts, ignorant of the life and ways in the Hell, think of the jungle as an ideal hiding place. The jungle—just as easy as fleeing through their own European forests! I wore myself out telling them that this kind of escape from the convict colony offered no chance of success, that it was utterly impossible! They refused to believe me. The only things they feared were the wild and ferocious animals—snarling, great jaguars, and huge boas and cannibal Indians. The real dangers they scoffed at—they laughed when I told them about the mosquitoes and malaria, and the bad river water.

"If others have escaped, then we can, too!" they said. Sometimes I would become tired of their smug plans. And I would then tell them a few facts which ought to have sent shivers down their spines.

"Don't forget that in the last eighty-five years, fifty thousand convicts have died in Guiana! We are eighty men here in this cage, there'll be seventy of us who will leave our bones in Guiana—under the bamboos, or with the sharks out at the Islands! The other ten of us will escape, and maybe a few will fight through alive successfully to freedom . . . unless we get caught and sent back!

"Half of us will be dead by this time next year! It's been like that all the time, and I guess you are no hardier than the others. It will be the same with you . . . just as it's always been!"

This sort of talk sobered them. But some hopefuls, surveying my gaunt and emaciated figure disdainfully, said: "Look at you! You aren't dead, and you aren't exactly an athlete."

"Sure! But wait till you've been down there as long as I have!" I told them. "Nearly seven hundred of us were put on this same ship in 1923. And there weren't forty-five left when I was given my parole!"

The guards picked me out and made things as tough as possible for me. For no reason at all, they punished me and wrote reports against me.

Things were going badly enough, but on the eighth day at sea the men in our cage complained that the food was impossible to eat, what little there was of it, and threw their share out through the bars! The Captain decided to punish two men, by way of example to assure order for the rest of the crossing. The guards picked me, merciless in their spirit of revenge; and they picked a young convict named Lanio as the other because of his notorious reputation, and put the two of us in irons.

We were both accustomed to all kinds of suffering. Flat on our backs, side by side, our bare feet stuck out beyond the iron bars of the cage. Iron chains held our ankles, so that we couldn't draw them back through the bars. Both of us had lived through hell before.

Tattooed in bold letters on the broad chest of my companion were the words, *ENFANT DU MALHEUR* . . . Child of Misfortune! As we lay there side by side, with the engines throbbing under the hot greasy floor of the hold, our feet in the sloshing water of the scupper, he pieced up his sad past.

His father had been an unskilled laborer, killed in an accident while at work. His mother went off with another man, and Lanio was left abandoned in Paris, where a policeman found him wandering in the streets. He was sent to a private institution which cared for waifs.

Many of these institutions are run for profit rather than for charitable purposes. The government pays them a certain sum for each child taken in. Also, they receive a part of the boys' pay when they hire them out.

Lanio was rented out to a farmer. Only a few weeks later, to escape the hard work and heavy punishments the eight-year-old boy ran away. But he was caught and sent off to a juvenile reformatory.

And so, at that tender age when other children are thinking wide-eyed of Santa Claus, and happily hanging their stockings on the mantelpiece, this child learned the meaning of a dark cell and a bread-and-water diet. In such a school he learned little but deceit and trickery with which to outwit his bullying guards. At thirteen he was already considered incorrigible. He tried time and time again to escape, and was at last sent to the "disciplinary school" at Eysses, a house of correction where children are treated more harshly than the most hard-

ened criminals in the prisons. Here he got so accustomed to thirty days of the dark cells with bread and water that he no longer thought anything of it. Such was his boyhood.

When he finally came of age, he was drafted to the disciplinary battalions of the African army. Here his sole companions were hardened insurgents and rebellious lawbreakers, for the rank and file were all recruited either from reformatories, as he had been, or from prisons, while the non-commissioned officers were to a man hard-boiled Corsicans—that is to say, considerably tougher and more brutal than the ordinary prison-guard.

One day he had a fight with a corporal. He was thrown into the military penitentiary at Biribi, sentenced to five years hard labor. He knew that he had no chance of getting out until he was forty-five; that is, until he was past the age limit for military service. So, like his fellow comrades, he played the game of trickery and cunning, rebellion and attempted escape in which half-maddened men don't mind death too much. "The Century Game," they called it! They'd bet to see who could first accumulate one hundred years of added punishments! With chains on his feet, guarded by tough Corsicans who kept their revolvers always in hand, he played that game with the best, and got himself sixty-five extra years at hard labor!

But the military prisons were suppressed by a press campaign aroused by Albert Londres' exposé of prison life, *Dante n'avait rien vu.* (Dante hardly saw any-

thing.) At twenty-eight Lanio was free, and he had his first days in the busy city of Paris. Just to *live* was a great joy to him! But Lanio seemed doomed. He was a misfit—he knew nothing of life or of self-discipline, nothing of obligation to society. One night a gendarme attempted to arrest him for disturbing the peace, and Lanio in a fit of rage shot him dead.

In the course of his trial at the Assizes the famous criminal lawyer who took his case, cried passionately to the jury: "Finish your good work, gentlemen! At the age of six Society picked him up as a lost child who had stolen some fruit and forced him into a house of correction! At the age of twenty-one Society sent him to the inhuman life of the notorious disciplinary battalions in Africa—battalions so *damnable* that you've had to suppress them! At the age of twenty-four Society sent him to the African hell known as Biribi. And you have suppressed *that* too! Now, don't hesitate any longer," he insisted, "finish the job! Send him to the guillotine—you will have done your work nobly, and you can say with pride that Society has done its duty!"

The brilliant plea of his lawyer saved Lanio's life. But he was given a life sentence at hard labor. Six months later, he escaped with three other convicts from the central prison at Fontevrault, where they were awaiting deportation to Guiana. This escape, the first ever made from the Fontevrault prison, caused quite a sensation, and when the fugitives were recaptured the authorities took no chances but kept them permanently in irons in

separate dark cells until the order came for their transfer to the Île de Ré jail for embarkation. Here also Lanio was segregated in irons in a cell. Now he lay beside me there in the hot hold of the *Martinière*, "*Child of Misfortune*" tattooed on his chest, asking me all sorts of questions about Guiana. His sole dream was to escape as soon as he got there, to gain a liberty which he had never yet known.

The first thing he wanted to know was about the savage animals of the jungle.

"Savage animals of the jungle? You have nothing to fear from them!" I told him.

"Even snakes?" Lanio had never seen a snake.

"Well . . . they are everywhere, and poisonous, but they'll run from you," I assured him. "You'll run no danger from snakes unless you happen to step on one. But there are the mosquitoes—hordes of them. Ah, there you have something dangerous! They'll bite you day and night! And in the forest you may go mad, and get the fever.

"You'll have to see a jungle first to know what it's like. Green leaves everywhere, thorns everywhere; a snarl of vines, and rain and dampness and water, and all the time the mosquitoes driving you mad. Every step is a chop with the machete! And that goes on for days and weeks and months before you can get anywhere!

"You'll never get away overland. Food gives out, and the ants find you when you're too weak to go on, or turn back. You've got to eat!—to live! You've got to

know that rain forest, to find things to eat. And that's hard, you don't learn it in a day! I could bury myself in it now with my machete, and wouldn't die from hunger. But it took me ten years to be able to do that, and even so, perhaps . . . ! I was like you when I first went to Guiana," and I told Lanio what happened to me the first time I tried to escape.*

"No one has ever crossed Guiana from north to south," I told him. "The first town to aim for would be Para or Manaos in Brazil, a thousand miles beyond the Tumuc Humacs mountains and across immense flooded rivers and swamps. You can't see the sky at night, because of the leaves; and in the daytime, in the half-light of the mist of rain coming down through foliage, it's a stark terror—solitude. You are afraid—even after many years, when you have learned the jungle, you are always uneasy. You have to get down on your knees and stoop along tapir trails, and crawl in the tunnelings of wild hogs through the tangles. And when you come out at their wallows, you are still lost in the dripping solitude. The alligators in the yellow water watch you with glazed eyes. Oh, they'll let you through! But you'll never forget the first time that you wade into that water, and zigzag your way past them to the other side, as their heads turn slowly in the water and their eyes follow you—and you feel like screaming!"

Lanio winced. I could see it was beginning to get under his skin at last.

* See "Dry Guillotine."

"You can get as far as the Tumuc Humacs mountains," I resumed, "—with luck, and if you know the country. That's already over in Brazil. There's a cutthroat "Convict Domain" in there! They are all *évadés* from Guiana. But the Brazilians are afraid to go in there and get them! You'd be all right there with the *évadés*, but you can't ever get out! You have to stick to the rivers in that flooded jungle. The only way out is down to the Amazon, and there the Brazilians will get you as you pass along down to Para."

"How many men in Guiana try that?" Lanio demanded.

"Oh, some of them who are fool enough to think they can!" I replied. "Look, I'll tell you what happened to one who did, and he was one of my friends.

"His name was Marchal. He went to Guiana in the same cargo with me in 1923. You'll meet him in the Colony for he's now around Saint Laurent.

"A few weeks after our arrival in the Hell he escaped into the jungle with two of the comrades who had arrived with him.

"They left Camp Godebert, situated some six miles north of St. Laurent, and meant to reach the gold placer mines on the upper Mana River. Once there on the placers, they hoped to get enough gold together among them to buy a dugout and provisions and try to escape by way of the sea.

"The older convicts who were at the camp told them

what path to follow into the jungle, and the direction to hold.

"They didn't take much food along with them—just what they could grab up in the camp—just a few loaves of bread and some rice. They sold their new clothes to the other convicts in the barracks, and bought some tins of condensed milk from the camp infirmary attendant. It wasn't much in the way of provisions, but they counted on the trip not lasting more than a few days.

"They were told to follow a trail through the jungle which would bring them to the bank of the Mana River. They were to go up the river till they got to the tenth tributary, where the placers are located. All in all, the journey should take a week.

"After they stole out of camp that night, they followed the trail for several days. It got fainter every day. Sometimes the rank vegetation had pushed up so dense as to completely hide it! They would find it again further on, after circling through the vines and thorns of the jungle, taking turns at hacking their way through with the one machete they had among them. On the fifth day, they lost the trail!

"After this happened they tried guiding themselves by the sun. But it's a hard job even for anyone with experience to do that, and impossible for men fresh from over in France like them! And when the eighth day came, they circled back onto their own trail!

"By now they were pretty nearly at the end of their

food, and were rationing it rigidly, but they struck off again—dead ahead, as they thought. This time they would keep their bearings and make the river, which wasn't far away! On the tenth day, their food was all gone and they were famishing. That afternoon they found fruit like oranges lying at the foot of a tall tree. Marchal's two famished companions rushed to pick up handfuls of them, leaped on them and ate their fill, laughing at him when he warned them the fruit might be poisonous, seeing that neither monkeys nor birds had touched it.

"Two hours later his companions were rolling on the ground and groaning in agony.

"Marchal made his way to the nearest creek and filled his straw hat, but the water did them no good. Dark had come and they didn't even have a shelter. All through that awful night his companions screamed as they twisted and writhed, but he could do nothing for them! They both died in his arms before daylight came.

"He dug a shallow grave for them with the blade of his machete. As soon as the bodies were covered with earth, he piled rocks over them to keep the wild animals from digging them out and eating them. Then he went on off through the undergrowth, hacking his desperate way straight in front of him through the dense tangle.

"For two more days he stumbled forward like this, hacking blindly. Then when darkness came on him, he let himself fall at the foot of a big tree. All night the

mosquitoes tormented his swollen back, and face and hands which were already raw and red from the constant bites and the tearing thorns.

"When he struggled to his feet again at dawn, he saw that he'd come to the edge of a big stretch of savannah grass! He bogged up to his knees when he tried to go into it. And he crawled back into the jungle, and decided to end it all then and there. He knew he could never go back the way he'd come—and ahead of him stretched the boggy waste of waving grass, and he knew he wouldn't last another night, in his condition, without food.

"Methodically he set about killing himself. He stood on a rotting log and threw the end of the piece of cloth he wore for a belt over one of the thick branches of a tree and made a noose.

"Now he'd never see his old mother again! It had been to go back to her before she died that he'd jumped at this apparently easy chance to escape. But he had failed. It was the end now! He'd kill himself while he still could—before the animals and the ants got him in the night. He was going to die in the jungle, like his companions! He knelt and began to pray out loud!

"The Mana River was really close by, but Marchal didn't know it. He was completely lost, deep in the impenetrable jungle! A black on his way up-river to the gold mines, pushing his dugout quietly along the bank, heard Marchal's wailing voice and slipped into the jungle to investigate. He found Marchal kneeling at the

foot of the tree, a pitiful tattered figure of a man, with the noose hanging from the branch above him—and he understood.

"The black took Marchal down to the edge of the river and fed him. He stayed with him all night, and by the next day he had brought him back to his senses. The black gave him some provisions, and helped him make a raft, and Marchal let himself drift with the current back down the river to the Maroni.

"Late in the afternoon of the next day, he drifted by Saint Laurent! He was so weak that he wasn't able to land his raft, and the current carried him past the village and on toward the sea. Some Indians saw him, however, from the Dutch bank and took him off the raft in their dugouts. They gave him up to the authorities, and he was locked up in the Blockhouses.

"A few months later, he was brought before the T.M.S. for trial. When he had finished describing his terrible adventure to the President of the court, he begged the President to sentence him to two years at hard labor for his escape. The President, in amazement, asked him why!

"Marchal told him, 'If you acquit me, *Monsieur le Président,* the Administration will punish me for illegal absence. It will give me sixty days in solitary confinement! You see how I am—very sick! The doctor won't send solitaries to the hospital. But if you sentence me to two more years, tomorrow I'll be released from the

Blockhouses and sent back to camp with the other convicts. Then I can go to the hospital!'

"And the President condemned Marchal to two additional years for his first escape!"

I dozed off in the sticky heat for a few minutes, but soon Lanio was back again with his eager questions.

"What is the best bet for getting away?" he demanded. "To have money—like the big shots!" I said. "In Guiana, the bigger criminal a man is, the less he suffers! The big criminals, the men who are truly dangerous to society, who get sent to Guiana, as a rule, escape after they've been there a few weeks."

"How can money do you any good there?" Lanio wanted to know.

"Bribes! I've known crooks in France who, as soon as they pulled some big job, at once set about preparing for their escape from Guiana in case some day they *did* slip up and get caught! One professional swindler whose crimes would have brought him at least ten years in prison in France, committed a robbery with violence. It was a pitifully small affair, something like a thousand francs, but the violence made it serious. Then when the police got to him for swindles which totaled some millions of francs he confessed of his own accord to the robbery with violence and was sent to Guiana for seven years! But he only stayed there three weeks."

"How did he work that?" asked Lanio wonderingly.

"Well, that's where the money came in! Before he arrived in Guiana his wife had sent to a Chinese mer-

chant in Saint Laurent a set of citizenship papers and a substantial sum of money as well as clothes. Then the merchant did his part—hid the convict, and by night took him across into Dutch Guiana. With his forged papers and thousands of francs in his pocket and a perfectly good Belgian passport, it wasn't hard to board a ship and sail away to South America. I could tell you of plenty of cases like that!

"There was the Villette Gang for instance—Tissier, now in business in Santa Marta, Cocard, who is a lieutenant in the Peruvian police, the Allart brothers, now running a hotel in Venezuela. Then there are Huignard,[1] Mourey,[2] Dr. Bougras,[3] Pommier, and fifty others!

"So it goes—the bigger the criminal, the easier it is for him to escape!"

"Yes, I see now!" Lanio exclaimed reflectively. "It looks a simple thing if you've got money. But, what about getting over the Maroni River into Dutch Guiana?" he asked. "Can't one just row over in a boat?"

"Yes, you can get into Dutch Guiana, all right! All you've got to do is hide until dark, and then steal a dugout along the Saint Laurent water front, and paddle across the river! But then you won't get any further. You'll just get sent back, and six months in the stinking Blockhouses! Those blacks and Indians over there get 5 francs a head for every convict they catch, dead or alive, and they're liable to kill you if they suspect you've

[1] See Page 66.
[2] See Page 70.
[3] See Page 133.

got a *plan*. Dutch Guiana has special police to look for the *évadés*. Of course, every time a new cargo of men arrives Dutch Guiana gets overrun for a few months. The Indians get them all. We old fellows don't try it because it's not worth living in chains in the Blockhouses for six months.

"Before 1923, the Dutch didn't bother much about the *évadés*. They were tolerated in the Colony. The *évadés* would work for anything they could get, and easily found work on the Dutch plantations and in the mines. And in Paramaribo, the capital, at least a hundred of them had jobs of one kind or another. Then in 1923, an *évadé* named Coutancot murdered a rich civilian and robbed him. He was sentenced to death and they hanged him in the capital of the Colony! Because of him, Queen Wilhelmina re-established the death sentence, which had not existed for a century. After that incident, all the *évadés* have been hunted down and sent back on the first launch crossing to St. Laurent."

"What about smugglers? Can't you get any of them to sneak you out!" Lanio demanded.

"That's no good any more. Those 'pirates,' as we call them in Guiana, are cutthroats! They want 1000 francs per head to take you to Para at the mouth of the Amazon. But when they get you out at sea, they stick a knife in your back, cut you open to get your *plan*, and throw you overboard! They're worse now than they used to be. At one time, if you were careful to pick the right man, you were pretty sure to land in Brazil. But now,

since 1928 when the Brazilian government decided to close the doors to convicts, it's too risky. The chances are too great! The authorities now seize any boat caught bringing an *évadé* into the country and make the captain pay a heavy fine. So it's safer for him to just throw you overboard! For years, we didn't know about this back in Guiana. It took a while for the news to get back to us, and there were many *évadés* murdered at sea!"

Lanio reflected a moment. "How about ships? Can't you stow away?"

"No, there are very few ships calling at Guiana, and they're closely watched. Sometimes, though, at Saint Laurent you can do it. But things have got to be just right, and you've got to have money to slip to this one and that. When the coasting tramps come in with meat and provisions from Venezuela, you can work yourself on board with the convicts loading wood for the engines, and hide in the holds. The guards count the men as they go ashore, and, as you're not one of them, you aren't discovered . . . and the ship goes away with you on it! I tried it once myself, and was caught." *

"Well, then, what *is* the best way!" Lanio exclaimed.

"By sea! More than half the men who try it drown, but still it's the best chance. In the spring the sea is quite calm, and that's when most of them go if they can time everything right. You've got to go a long way . . . to Trinidad! It's no easy matter in one of those slender river canoes of the Indians! Even when it's smooth sail-

* See "Dry Guillotine."

ing you are drenched all the time, and at night the cold, heavy dew that soaks you to the marrow. In the daytime, the tropical sun beats down on the water, and the glare and reflection on the sea cooks you alive in your skin. The constant spray cracks your burned hands, face and back. You are blistered and raw by the time you make Trinidad, and your eyes are so swollen you can hardly see. It takes two weeks! And sharks are always round you, waiting for you, day and night! Sometimes you get becalmed out there on the water, and you think you'll go crazy if the wind doesn't come soon—long, endless days of maddening sun, and all you can do is to get up and stretch your arms. You watch the infernal gulls circle round and round and round, and the warm drinking water in the barrel gets lower and lower. There are quarrels! You argue about direction. Some want to put for shore. The others, who have gotten arrested and sent back before, have to threaten them with knives to keep them from turning back. Nerves begin to go. Day and night, you have to sit there in a row in the sloshing brine which the waves keep slapping over the side. When you're doing your turn at the helm, curses are shouted at you every time you blunder putting the dugout through the waves. Some days you have the coffee all made, and a sudden wave will knock it over and ruin it and the precious last rations of beef cooking over the fire. Then there are the storms! One morning the sun'll come up all glaring red, and a gale whips up in an hour. It's the hurricane! Thunder and lightning

crash all around you. And you crouch low in the open dugout with the driven rain whipping into your raw sunburned shoulders. You're not men, but just a bunch of miserable creatures—some seasick—clutching silently at the wet boards and bailing desperately for life in a frail dugout which bobs like a pencil. Some nights you see a big liner's passing lights, and you envy the passengers safe inside.

"Every year, though, at least 150 men try it. They know the chances—but that doesn't stop them. You'll soon see how existence in the Colony offers only two alternatives—escape or death. Because, if you don't die outright, you starve to death. A man really has nothing to lose! I shall be ready to try the sea again now that my liberty and life are once more at stake. But not for any other reason—not even for a million!"

"Well, it couldn't be worse than this!" exclaimed Lanio, trying to lift his feet out of the dirty scupper water. "These blasted chains are cutting my ankles raw!"

After a pause, Lanio suddenly asked me: "Say, Belbenoit—supposing I tried the sea, how do I go about it?"

"Well, in the first place you find a *libéré* to buy the stuff," I said. "He's a free man in the Colony, and so he can get the things without being watched. He gets a barrel that'll hold about 50 gallons of water. As for food—well, that depends on how much money the men can pool. The food has to take up as little room as possible. It usually consists of bread, tins of condensed milk, cof-

fee, sugar, onions, dry meat, rice and cassava. A small stove made of a gasoline can, a sack of charcoal, and few machetes round out the supplies. The sail is made from old clothes. If you happen to be in one of the penitentiaries, you walk away from work in the afternoon on some pretense, and hide out until night. But if you are in one of the camps, where the barracks have no doors, you can just slip out after dark! An organized escape costs about 200 francs per man. And that means *money* in Guiana! Sometimes you have to do some bribing. The main thing is that you must have somebody who knows how to navigate at sea. Men who know the sea are few in the Colony, and are much in demand. The navigator goes free. On him depends the success of the whole escape. It has often happened that a convict who hasn't money to pay his share, but is desperate to escape, will try to pass off as a sailor!

"But don't the police hunt down the men who get away?" Lanio asked.

"Oh, yes. They try to!" I replied, "but they don't get very far. Most of the time they don't find any clues! Over here the police are inexperienced, and they don't keep many records. The police of one country don't co-operate with those of another. It's not like Europe! The only real danger you run is when you are landing. Once you're *in* a country, and use your head and mind your business you're all right. But if you're ever arrested on any charge, or get out of money and they suspect

you even speak French—then you've got to actually prove you've never been in Guiana!"

"Doesn't the Administration send for the *évadés?*" Lanio asked.

"No, they don't care! France sends convicts to Guiana to get rid of them. If they die, or get away—all that comes to the same thing! The main object is to see that we don't get back into France!"

"And don't the governments of these countries around Guiana protest?"

"These days they are getting thoroughly fed up with arresting the *évadés*. Already some nations have protested to the French government, but it hasn't produced any results! And then these are small republics and they don't dare pester a major nation with too many protests like that.

"There isn't much they'll ever be able to do by individual protest. But you can't wonder they get mad! . . . Like Venezuela! Up to 1930, Venezuela meant liberty! Never before that year had an *évadé* been sent back to Guiana. No man in Guiana thought Venezuela would ever turn back the *évadés!*

"Alas, we were all wrong! On the 2nd of November a boat arrived from Caracas with a load of sixty-three *évadés*. And eight months later came another batch of fifty-six that Venezuela had sent back to Cayenne!"

"What had happened?" asked Lanio.

"Well, so long as the *évadés* had been careful, and

had got caught for only small offenses in the country, the police had more or less ignored them and were tolerant. But the *évadés* got bold. And some got into the limelight. They formed a gang. In 1927 and right after that, in 1928, they robbed several banks.

"The people got excited. 'It's the work of *los cayenenses*—the Cayenne men!' the papers said in headlines. The investigations revealed that *évadés* were in on all the various rackets—and even worse, were often the leaders. The population was up in arms. The authorities fumed!

"To cap the climax, two *évadés* were found mixed up in a plot to assassinate President Gomez! And Gomez, the iron despot that he was, even to his own subjects, acted on the spot. He gave the order to arrest all *cayenenses*. That was easy, for up to this time, the *évadés* in the country hadn't taken any great care to hide their identity. About a hundred were arrested in a few days by the police.

"Gomez demanded that the Administration come get them. But the Administration took its time sending the boat. When the boat finally got there a year and a half later, Gomez demanded a high indemnity per head to pay for feeding them. The Administration refused to pay, and the boat returned to the Colony empty!

"To get his money's worth, Gomez set them all to work on the highway he was building from Ciudad Bolivar to Caracas, the capital. They had to work like driven slaves from dawn till dark, rain or sun, with iron

balls on their ankles—were given just enough to eat to keep them alive—were shot down by Gomez's drunken guards just to see 'how a Frenchman jumps in the air!'

"Then, when the highway was finished, Gomez herded one hundred and nineteen of them onto boats, and sent them off to Cayenne!

"Only one of the *évadés* was not arrested by the police. This was Dr. Bougras."

"How was that?" asked Lanio.

"He had been of great value to the Venezuelans in an epidemic! Bougras was condemned to hard labor for a murder which was pinned on him. The murdered man had been Bougras' buddy in the war. Bougras said it was a frame-up!

"He'd been Chief of Hospitals during the war, and was an Officer of the Legion of Honor. When he arrived in Guiana in 1928, he was put in the hospital at Saint Laurent as an attendant. After about two months, he learned the Ministry had sent orders he was to be interned on the Islands. So one night he escaped in a dugout with seven other convicts.

"Ten days later, they landed at Irapa on the coast of Venezuela. The whole region was being ravaged by an epidemic of grippe. It was killing the population like rats! Bodies were being hauled to the cemeteries or just emptied out in the jungle in cartfuls! Bougras went to work and saved hundreds! He saved the life of the Governor of the province! Bougras became the idol of the people in the region—they looked on him as their sav-

ior. News of all this came to the ears of President Gomez. He gave orders officially authorizing Dr. Bougras to live in Venezuela, and to practice medicine anywhere in the country except in Caracas, the capital. Bougras went to the large island of Santa Margarita. Soon he opened a clinic which is well known today. He's married now, and has two little girls."

"Are all the countries like Venezuela?" Lanio asked.

"Yes," I answered, "you have to be careful in all of them now. British Guiana, Colombia, Brazil, Venezuela —they all try to arrest you and send you back to the Colony. They finally found out how many of the crimes committed in their countries are the work of the *évadés:* a fourth of all the robberies in Colombia! . . . white slavery and dope rings in Brazil and Argentina, Panama and Central America.

The *évadés* have always abused the hospitality of Trinidad, too! The British there are sporting. They've always been kind to the *évadés* who reach their island."

"They don't send you back from there?"

"No. They only send you on, with a boat and all the supplies, after you've rested a month on their island. You are lodged at the quarters of the Salvation Army—the government contributes a shilling a day for this special purpose. You are free on the island for one month.

"But some of the *évadés* have hidden away in the interior of the island when their month was up! Others shipwreck on purpose offshore when they set out in the

new boat—crash a hole in it, and sink it with all the provisions so they can stay longer on the island! *

"Where do you go when you have to leave Trinidad?" Lanio wanted to know. In his mind he was already escaping from Guiana.

"You sail for the end of the Gulf, and try to reach Panama. Or you fight the trade wind, and steer north from Guiana and make for Haiti and Cuba. There are many other islands on that course . . . and some, like Martinique, are French and you can't land. Up in Cuba they haven't seen *évadés* much, and the natives along the coast are kind and help you. But that's in the villages—it's safer not to land in any of the towns on any island! From Cuba, some *évadés* have tried to sail across to Florida. It hasn't been done yet—but I think it can be! The current is strong, and takes you with the trade wind west into the Gulf."

* *Note:* Trinidad in July, 1938, officially closed the island haven to the *évadés*, and now sends them back to Guiana, finding their increasing numbers arriving on the island too great a drain on the budget.

Chapter IX

Back in the Penitentiary

THE long, hot days down in the sweltering hold passed slowly one after another. Seven times the convict ship had stopped in her course. Seven times the bodies of dead convicts had splashed into the sea.

Finally, early one dawn, the ship's whistle blew. Daylight showed the banks of the Maroni River through the portholes, to which every man in the cage glued himself to get his first look at the prison hell! But I found no incentive to look.

The engines were stopped, and soon the anchor dropped. Saint Laurent was an old story to me—the less I could see of it the better. Saint Laurent, which I had left almost three years ago as a passenger, when from the decks of the *Biskra* I watched the grim banks of the Maroni slip away! I had kept my word to the Governor, made every effort to regain my footing in the society of men. And that had been considered a crime, and society and its laws had thrown me back into the hell again.

We were walked off the *Martinière* in pairs and lined up on the long pier. *Libérés*, tattered and unshaven, sullenly watched our long queue pass along the bank of the

muddy river toward the penitentiary. Many of them recognized me and greeted me with a friendly sign. Among them, too, were convicts in their red and white stripes and the wide straw hats. "*Bonjour*, René," one said to me.

We filed along the bank of the Maroni a distance of several hundred yards, then turned to the left. In the high wall, there was a huge gate before which were a number of guards and some convicts, and I passed again under the words in large letters:

PENITENTIER DEPOT DE
SAINT LAURENT DU MARONI

"Halt!" rasped a loud, sharp voice—the chief guard of the camp. He examined the long line of faces. His eye caught mine. He gave a grim smile. "Belbenoit—to the Blockhouses!" he barked. And he added mockingly, "You know the way."

So my convict life began anew. I was back in the clutches of Penal Administration again. The cell twenty-three hours out of each twenty-four, the bowl of rice dry and monotonous to eat, sticking in my throat with each swallow. Hardly a day passed but the guards searched my cell thoroughly high and low. I was under redoubled watch. I was the star prisoner of the cargo—the celebrity of the prison colony.

I waited with impatience the decision of the Governor of French Guiana. My case had been submitted to

his discretion. I expected to be freed from the Blockhouses any day—become a *libéré* again in Guiana.

One morning, after two long weeks, I was summoned to the office of the Public Prosecutor. "You will be tried by the *Tribunal Maritime Spécial!*" he announced.

"Tried for what?" I demanded.

"On a charge of escape!" he snapped tersely.

"But I left Guiana with permission to go. I was given a passport! It's in the records. You know that, and the prison officials do too!" I cried.

"You can tell all that to your judges," he retorted. Then Prosecutor Barbet shoved a fistful of issues of *Police Magazine* at me with unconcealed anger. "Here! These precious articles of yours'll cost you dear!" he snapped.

Back in my cell I wrote a long letter to the Governor, over in Cayenne. I outlined the facts concerning my leave of absence, and asked him in simple words on what grounds he was submitting me to trial by the T.M.S.! I wrote a similar letter of protest to the Attorney General, the highest judiciary authority of the Colony.

Two weeks passed and I received no answer. I began to sense something was being plotted against me! The guards at the Blockhouses, more than usually harsh and hostile, punished me repeatedly without cause. Things were fast pointing into a blind alley for me. I realized I was going to be the victim of the Administration's vengeance. And I had to act quickly.

I concluded that my two protests to Cayenne had gotten into the hands of the Administration and never left Saint Laurent. But isolated in my cell, with a special guard, and forced to hand my letters to the Prosecutor for censoring, I was utterly helpless. The Administration having stopped one letter, would stop them all; I could sit there in my cell and write till doomsday! There was no turnkey to bribe! I saw nobody except the guards, and I was a curse to all of them. I would probably be condemned by the T.M.S. to hard labor! I knew what the Administration was capable of. We were in Guiana. It had always ruled the Colony and done as it saw fit. France was across the sea—far away, and no one there was concerned with the rights of condemned convicts.

I had at any cost to get myself to Cayenne and lay my case before the Governor before the T.M.S. acted!

And so I wrote a letter to Commandant Germain, one of the Commandants of the penitentiary of Saint Laurent. I said I had an extremely important communication to make—to him personally!

Next morning, at the hour of exercise the Commandant appeared in the court of the Blockhouses, dressed as usual in his uniform and regalia. With him were the chief guards of the penitentiary and the Blockhouses.

We were about fifty *libérés* walking around monotonously in queue in the silent court. The Commandant called me out of line. He said gruffly to me, "You have something to tell me, Belbenoit?"

"*Oui, mon Commandant!*" I said tensely. And, in a loud voice so that all those who were present could hear clearly what I said, I called out: "I wrote from the cell for you to come see me. I've got something very important to tell you—you are a bastard and a . . . (I used the vilest word I knew).

"Lock him in his cell!" the Commandant roared, livid with rage. The guards leaped on me and dragged me away to my cell, where I was placed in irons!

Now, at last, I should get to Cayenne. I had deliberately insulted a high official of the Administration so that I could be summoned before the Court of Correction.

Then, being a *libéré*, I had the right to appeal their decision to the Appellate Court in Cayenne. In Cayenne I could find some means of reaching the Governor.

Within eight days the Court of Correction of Saint Laurent gave me another month in the Blockhouses for insulting an official. That day Prosecutor Barbet came to my cell.

"So you want to go over to Cayenne?" he asked with a sarcastic grin. "You'll go—but not till I'm ready to send you!" He went away chuckling to himself.

I didn't get over to Cayenne. The Administration had been too clever! I should have had better sense than to believe I would. But it was my only chance!

That night I lay awake in my cell and went over in my mind the details of the foul injustice with which I had been flung back into the convict life. That night

my love for France died in me. That night I set myself to live only for escape, that I might write a book which would help to destroy Devil's Island and that the name stood for.

A month passed. Finally, I was taken out of the strict confinement of my damp cell to appear before the Special Maritime Tribunal.

Chapter X

My Trial before the "Tribunal Maritime Spécial"

THE courtroom was filled to capacity. About a hundred *libérés* in their tattered, dirty clothes were jammed into the space at the rear of the hall, where standing room was reserved for them, while the seats were crowded with clerks and officials who had deserted their offices to watch a trial which they hoped would prove interesting. They gazed at me grimly or with curiosity, and exchanged whispered comments. Most of them knew me, and every single one of them knew about the *Police Magazine* articles and about my parole.

A detachment of Senegalese infantrymen, rifles in hand and their regimental red fezzes on their shiny black heads, stood guard in front of the raised platform where the members of the *Tribunal Maritime Spécial* would take their seats. The corporal's dry command resounded the length of the hall: "Attention!" There was a sharp click of their heels. And the members of the T.M.S. filed in and took their seats.

"*Present . . . arms!*" barked the corporal. Hands clacked resoundingly on the rifle butts.

"*Rest . . . arms!*" The butts thumped to the floor in a heavy staccato.

The President of the T.M.S., an officer in the colonial infantry of the French Army, bearing on his wide chest several decorations, came to his feet and announced that the first session of the Tribunal for the year 1934 was open. Then he gave the floor to the Court Clerk, who was a prison guard acting in that capacity.

The clerk began reading out to the court the articles of accusation in my case:

"*Article No. 1.*

We, Governor of French Guiana, by virtue of the rights conferred upon us, order the bringing before the Court for trial *Libéré* No. 16,444, Belbenoit, René, accused of violating the laws and regulations now in force.

Done in Cayenne, this 18th day of December, 1933.

LAMY, *Governor.*

"*Article No. 2.*

René Belbenoit, *libéré* 16,444 is accused of breach of residence, under the provisions of Article 6 of the law of May 30, 1854.

"*Article No. 3.*

Interrogation of *libéré* René Belbenoit of date October 27, 1933:

Q. Why did you leave the Colony without permission?

A. I left the Colony in the possession of a passport delivered by the Governor of French Guiana, which was granted to me after a decision of the Privy Council of the Colony, which decision figures in the Official Journal of French Guiana of the month of October, 1930.

Q. Why did you not return to the Colony at the expiration of your permission, which was for one year?

A. At the expiration of my permission I placed myself voluntarily in the hands of the French authorities at the port of Le Havre, which amounts to the same thing.

Q. Have you anything further to say?

A. Nothing. I am not guilty, I have not violated any law and, in consequence, I have nothing to clear myself of.

Q. Is that all you have to say?

A. Yes."

The clerk handed the articles of evidence to the President of the tribunal, and he now began cross-examining me. This particular officer had presided over the last session of the T.M.S., showing himself so severe that the convicts declared he was insane. This was proved to be true a few short months after my trial, when he had to be sent to a sanitarium in Paris.

"Your name, surname and status?" he demanded peremptorily.

"Belbenoit, René, *libéré*," I answered.

"Born where?"

"In Paris, April 4th, 1899."

"You were authorized to leave the Colony for a term of one year. Why did you fail to return to the Colony at the expiration of this period?"

"My leave of residence in the Colony expired November 12th, 1931. And at that date, I was in the custody of the French authorities at Le Havre. I placed

myself voluntarily in their hands, Mr. President, which amounts to the same thing."

"No!" he exploded from his high seat on the platform. "Or you wouldn't be put on trial here today before this Tribunal, to answer for your crime."

"*What* crime, Mr. President?" I asked him.

"The one covered in the provisions of, and punished by, Article 6 of the law of May 30, 1854!" he snapped back at me angrily.

"Will you be good enough to read the words of that article of the law, Mr. President?" I asked in a tone loud enough to be heard over the entire hall.

The President of the T.M.S. glowered, but motioned impatiently to the Court Clerk who, rising to his feet, read out the article:

"Article 6 of the law of May 30, 1854. Any *libéré* who shall leave the Colony without authorization shall be punishable with a sentence of from one year to three years at hard labor. Any *libéré* having been authorized to leave the Colony and who overstays his leave of absence, will be considered in breach of residence and shall be punishable also with a sentence of from one year to three years at hard labor!"

"But this Article does not apply to my case, your Honor!" I exclaimed vigorously. "*I* did not leave the Colony without authorization. I did *not* exceed the period of liberty granted me. I surrendered myself vol-

untarily to the French police authorities at Le Havre on the 3rd of November. By the 12th of November of 1931 I had already been nine days in the custody of the law. I am a *libéré*, a freedman with civil rights, and not a convict who had to report to the prison Administration. At that time I was repossessed of full rights to go where I liked," I exclaimed. And I pleaded that I had not gone to France to sidestep the end of my term of absence, but to seek a full pardon which I felt I had every just cause to think I could obtain from the Ministry of Justice.

"Yes, but you entered France without authorization!" the President reminded me brusquely.

"I did *not* enter France, sir! The police came on the ship *Wyoming* and took me ashore under arrest. You cannot accuse me of entering the country illegally." And I reminded the court that it was on my own insistence that they arrested me on board, that I had made no attempt to enter the country while I still had nine more days of freedom.

"You had no right to enter France, Belbenoit!" the President disputed angrily.

"I didn't, your Honor! So under what Article of the law are you going to convict me?" I asked flatly.

"Your case has not had a precedent and does not fall under any provision of the law. But you have committed a misdemeanor that is punishable. Have you anything more to say to the court?"

"To convict a man, Mr. President, it is necessary that

he break some law. This is not the case with me—I have broken no law! There is no case against me! I am not liable to prosecution. I am not even liable to indictment!"

The President cut me short with a gesture. "Commandant Barbet has the floor," he announced to the hall.

Commandant Barbet got to his feet. He was smiling with satisfaction, for he loved every opportunity to be the center of attention. He had come to the Colony as Arab interpreter, had used his abilities and cunning to rise rapidly in rank. Now he was Commandant of the penitentiary of Saint Laurent and also Public Prosecutor for the Colony. A formidable set-up against anyone opposing the Administration!

Ever since my return to the Colony the previous October, he had shown a dogged relentlessness toward me, and I had resented this treatment and had written several letters to the Ministry and the Governor, denouncing him and appealing for fairer treatment.

I knew Barbet, Commandant and Prosecutor, would make use of every means in his power to get me the maximum sentence. I was all on edge waiting to hear what he would say.

"The *libéré* Belbenoit," he began, "has been put on trial before this court by order of an authority higher than myself," making reference to the Governor, as if fawningly belittling himself. "Belbenoit is not only indictable, but is also liable to conviction," he told the court. "I am going to read to you, Gentlemen, a letter

which Belbenoit the Blackmailer wrote last year to his Excellency the Minister of Foreign Affairs from the prison of St. Martin de Ré, while waiting for the convict ship to sail."

At the mention of this letter I rose slightly from my seat. How had he gotten that letter! And as I sank back on the bench, my mind played furiously with the thought: The Minister never even saw my letter!

"I beg your close attention, Gentlemen," Commandant Barbet said, clearing his throat and smoothing out the sheets of paper with an air of great importance. "This letter is dated: Saint Martin de Ré, March 1933. And it says:

" 'Having addressed a petition for a pardon from my sentence of enforced residence in Guiana to Monsieur the Minister of Justice, I venture to beg the high favor of your support.

" 'Having been sentenced to eight years at hard labor for theft in 1921, I had worked out my sentence in September of 1930. Under the law, I was to reside permanently in the Colony as a *libéré*.

" 'A few weeks after I was set free I was granted a special authorization to leave the Colony for one year and live outside.

" 'After living out of the Colony eleven months, I came to France to surrender myself voluntarily to the French authorities, in the expectation of being granted a pardon allowing me to recommence my life in France. Being a pensioned War Veteran, having committed no unredeemable crime, having obtained a special permission to leave

the Colony, and possessing a record of excellent conduct during that year I lived abroad, I thought that my pardon would be granted me without difficulty.

" 'I wrote a first request for a pardon last year; a request which, in spite of a favorable recommendation from his Excellency the President of the Republic, was rejected.

" 'Today I am addressing a second request and am humbly asking you to support it with a favorable recommendation.

" 'While I was staying in Panama in 1931 I received an offer from a syndicate of American newspapers to write them a series of articles about the life of the convicts in Guiana. I was offered $1,000, which to me represented a small fortune.

" 'I had given my word to the Governor of Guiana that I would not write anything, while on my leave of absence from the Colony, criticizing our penal system. However, being without money and tempted also by the offer of such a large sum of money so easy to earn, I made known the proposition to Monsieur Langlais, the French Chargé d'Affaires at Panama.

" 'Monsieur Langlais advised me strongly not to do it. He said he would explain the incident to the Ministry and recommend me for a pardon. At that time I hardly had ten dollars in the world, and yet I refused to sell my memoirs.

" 'Surely this action speaks in my favor and proves that there is still some good in me.

" 'If I am sent back to Guiana, I am going to escape . . .' "

Commandant Barbet stopped. "You hear that, Gentlemen! 'I am going to escape!' " he repeated vehemently.

He turned back to my letter.

" '. . . For it is impossible to rebuild one's life in a colony where there is no work to be had honestly; and if a day comes in a foreign country when they offer again to buy my writings . . . what would I do?' "

He dropped the letter on his desk and cried to the court, "This, Gentlemen, is blackmail! It means: *Give me a pardon or I tell all!*"

He surveyed me ominously where I sat and then broke the hush in the court room. "The Minister refused a pardon! Neither will we pardon this master *blackmailer* Belbenoit!" he shouted.

Bitterness gripped my heart as he took his seat in a flurry of applause from the officials of the Administration. I had written that letter in the spirit of all frankness, without the slightest intention of making any threat—it had been my last desperate gesture, my one hope for help from one in high position and authority, when I was about to fall back into the clutches of the Administration. And now they turned my frank letter into an attempt at blackmail!

Scowling at me, Commandant Barbet said: "I demand the maximum sentence for this Belbenoit—three years at hard labor!" Wheeling on his heels to face the members of the T.M.S., he foamed, pounding his fist into the open palm of his left hand: "Gentlemen, Belbenoit *is* guilty! Belbenoit is to be convicted! Unquestionably so! Do not forget the statement in his letter: 'I will escape!'

"Belbenoit has just spent the last two years * confined in the prisons in France," he reminded the court. "If you sentence him to two years at hard labor, he will be freed and a *libéré* by tomorrow. For Belbenoit, this master blackmailer, I ask the maximum sentence—three years!" And he took his seat, proud of his speech, while the guards clapped again.

The President now gave the floor to the guard assigned to my defense.

My "lawyer" got up. He was a young guard, who had only been three months in the Colony. He had certainly never spoken in public in all his life. And the presence of his chiefs and superiors, the high officials of the Administration, as well as his comrades, was too much for his nerves. Pale and trembling, he stammered out, in a weak and almost unintelligible voice:

"I ask the indulgence of the court for Belbenoit." And without waiting for the President to tell him, he plopped back into his chair. Such was the "defense" provided by the Administration for an accused!

"Have you anything further to say, Belbenoit?" the President demanded.

I got to my feet. I had lapsed back into the state of mind of the condemned man . . . My conviction was certain, and the maximum sentence of three years! "*Monsieur le Président*, you are an officer of the Army. The decorations on your chest show you to be a man

* These years, under the penal laws of France, are counted against a sentence passed by a court while the prisoner is in confinement.

of character. I ask you only to render me justice, and judge me according to your own conscience!"

The farce was over. After a short pretense at deliberation the President pronounced me guilty and condemned to three years at hard labor. And I was informed by the court that I had three days of grace in which to ask the Court of Appeals in France for a review of the case.

The very next day the first thing I did was to write my appeal, to be sent to the high court in Paris, asking that my sentence be revoked on the plea that the trial had been illegal. At the same time I wrote a letter to an eminent lawyer in Paris, Maître Rouvières, asking him to conduct my case before the Court of Appeals and instructing him to call at the offices of *Police Magazine* where he would receive an advance of 1,000 francs towards his services.

The letters, when I had them ready, were duly sent to Prosecutor Barbet, and I sat back with confidence to await results.

"In Paris they have *judges!*" I consoled myself.

Days lengthened into weeks, and I waited confidently to hear that my Guiana conviction had been annulled by the Court of Appeals in Paris.

Finally, the morning came—the 25th of April, weeks after the Commandant-Prosecutor had taken my letters from my cell to be mailed to France. I heard the whistle

of the mail boat arriving from France. This, I figured, was the normal time it would take for a reply to get back: one month to reach Paris, one month for the Court of Appeals to act, and another month for the decision to get back to Cayenne!

My expectations had not been amiss. In the afternoon, a guard came to my cell, unlocked the door and commanded me to follow him to the Commandant's office. On his desk, behind which he smiled cynically, a few papers with official letterheads were spread out. The Commandant was so smug that I caught the ominous hint that he had won!

He held out a document to me and said, "Sign this!" Written in large letters in red ink, across the sheet I read the word: "REJECTED"!

"The answer from Paris!" Commandant Barbet commented dryly. I stared in a daze at the large seals and the flourish of signatures. There was no room for doubt that my appeal really had been rejected! Automatically I took the pen and signed.

But the Commandant was too happy about the matter to let me go without one more sneer. He had been waiting for this moment a long time, too. "Well, Belbenoit, you've lost the second round!" he said mockingly, as I stood before him half stunned by the shock.

I looked at him in silence, not getting the point. "Yes!" he chuckled out of his black mustache. "In 1930 you won—Governor Siadous gave you your passport to quit the Colony. Today you have lost! You won the first

round . . . you lost the second one!" He thought it was a good joke and laughed loudly.

As I stood there and watched him, my anger rose to white heat. "There's still the rubber," I said, looking him straight in the eye.

"Eh? Ha-ha . . . yes, yes!" he replied jeeringly, disdain in his tone and attitude. He looked at my bare feet and my ragged clothes, my small and emaciated figure, shrugged his shoulders, and motioned to the waiting guard.

"Have Belbenoit put on the convict rolls at once. He will be sent out to the Islands on the first boat. He'll stay in solitary confinement in his cell until then."

Chapter XI

The French Court of Appeals

I WALKED out of the Commandant's office broken and downcast, past comprehending things. All was confusion in my mind and spirit. I even came to doubt my own innocence! I feared I might go mad at any moment, in the sudden shock of despair. This was a crashing blow between the eyes, when I had been so positive that the Court of Appeals would decide in my favor.

The highest court in France had endorsed my guilt by rejecting my appeal. But I could not convince myself that I was in the wrong. A hundred times, as I restlessly roused from my sleep, I repeated to myself logically: I left Guiana with a passport all in order and provided by the highest officer of the Guiana government; I gave myself up voluntarily to the French police before the end of my permit to reside abroad; I didn't overstay my permit to live in freedom outside Guiana; I was taken into custody on board ship, therefore I am not guilty of the charge of attempting to enter France illegally. Therefore, what crime have I committed? I *have* committed a crime, since the Court of Appeals refused to

annul the decision! To have committed a crime, for it seemed I had done so, and not to be able to grasp what it was—that tortured me beyond telling.

And so the months of captivity began to pass. But I was to discover, after a time, how my appeal to the Court of Appeals had been treated in France. Once again, the Administration had played its clever and deadly hand!

Months after my shock in the office of Commandant Barbet, a letter from Maître Rouvières, my defense counsel for my appeal to the Court of Appeals in Paris, reached my hands—he returned the money for taking my defense, and enclosed an article written by the eminent author on criminal matters, Maurice Coriem. The article had been published on the front page of *Police Magazine*, in the September, 1934, number, under the title of "The Judiciary Adventure of 46,635." And I discovered why my sentence had been recognized as legal and in form by the Court of Appeals!

I learned that I had been made the victim of a shameful double-cross by the treacherous Administration. And I learned, also, how the judges of the Court of Appeals in Paris, the highest magistrates of France, study the cases of the unfortunate men who submit appeals to them as last word in justice!

Maurice Coriem began his article with the statement that my trial was for an escape that had no basis in fact except in the minds of my judges in Guiana, the officials

of the Administration whose abuses I had exposed in the articles I had written. He continued:

"When Belbenoit heard the last words of the President: 'Condemned, you have three days to address your appeal,' his heart was filled with hope. He realized that all was not yet lost, and next day he wrote a request to the Court of Appeals and, at the same time, sent a letter to one of the most distinguished lawyers of the Paris bar, Maître Rouvières.

"And he faced the future with patience, with confidence. . . . At last now, the judiciary paradox that had hounded him during many long months would perhaps dissipate itself.

"Two envelopes left for the distant continent: The paper stamped by the Court Clerk, embellished with impressive seals, and the little letter written on the Penal Administration letterhead, which bears that ironical motto: *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*.

"However, it came to pass that the two letters which left together did not arrive at the same time! They *left* together, one sent from the Court Clerk's office, the other sent from the cell of the convicted man. Between this departure and their arrival, there had been the Penal Administration! The Administration had not held back the papers of the Court Clerk. It could not do so. It *could* do so with the letter of the convicted man.

"I have seen this letter. I have seen the envelope. Maître Rouvières does not advance any conclusions from the uncorrelated departure and arrival of the two dispatches. The one from René Belbenoit bears a post office mark of February 2nd. It took eight weeks to arrive! Immediately, Maître Rouvières went to the Court of Appeals. He de-

manded access to the file of pending cases. But he was informed: 'Belbenoit, 46,635? His case has been passed on.' "

"What verdict?"

"Appeal dismissed!"

Coriem had interviewed Maître Rouvières himself in his study. He continues:

"And so the sentence passed on this unfortunate, a debatable sentence, open to criticism, is final?

" 'It is final!'

"There was no lawyer there to defend him? Would there have been any chance of sustaining the appeal?

" 'I believe that, from what I know about the case record, I would have discovered one.'

"But was there a counsel for the defendant?

" 'Without doubt there was.'

"Then he must have looked for and produced before the Court the reason for the appeal. It was his business to plead to it.

"Maître Rouvières did not answer.

"So I went myself to the Court of Criminal Appeals and attended a session of this judiciary body which every Saturday settles the appeals of the condemned, not only throughout France, but from her entire Empire.

"The hearing was scheduled to begin at one o'clock. But one easily realizes that the eminent magistrates of the Supreme Court do not have their arrivals supervised by a strict comptroller. On the stroke of a quarter to two, the doors were slowly opened into the magnificent audience-chamber with its richly carved, gold-adorned ceiling, the very splendor of which seemed an insult to the wretched cases about to perish there.

"The court is as painfully sleepy as the house of the Sleeping Beauty and I am not at all certain that its members were not even then in the midst of their slumber.

" '*Rejected. Case in order. Sentence legally pronounced!*'

"Every two minutes the President, from his high central bench, murmurs these words in a weary but distinguished voice.

"During the short time that I was present in this deserted chamber where I was the sole spectator, an old man pronounced words, the mumblings of which failed to convey any meaning whatever. He is a counsel for the defendants, who acquaints his colleagues with his findings from the case reports.

"I feel for old age, in general, all the respect which it is its due. And when this longevity testifies to a proven mastery of the science of the legal code, my respect rises to veneration. But I maintain that the first quality in a judge is to be able to make himself understood.

"This all-but-centenarian is certainly filled with knowledge, almost to the point of being overburdened with it. Just the same, it would be a fine thing to know what a matter is all about when called upon to apply one's learning.

"But after all, it may be that audibility is really less necessary than it seemed to me; since, with the last unintelligible syllable of each report, the voice of the President answered instantly and automatically: '*Rejected. Case in order. Sentence legally pronounced.*'

"Very possibly true! But, I say it in all sincerity, no one knows anything about it, and there's no possibility of finding out anything about it.

"I heard, in the course of that afternoon, the judging of two hundred criminal records from all the Courts of Assizes of France and of the colonies. Two hundred times I

heard the same statement, impassively repeated: *'Rejected. Case in order. Sentence legally pronounced.'*

"Not one single time, not one, did I hear any other decision. Not once, did I hear this same decision given in different words.

"And—even more serious—not once did I hear a case investigator (I am speaking of the case investigators whom one could hear) sustain a point which he had discovered in a case submitted. I say this because I think it should be told, because it is true, because I know it to be true—he did not look for any points!

"And yet we all believe that in cases of such importance, every possible protection and guaranty is given by the Law to the individual. The very fact that a Court of Appeals is solemnly instituted with membership of it reserved to the highest magistrates, shows that such an institution is expected to accomplish a great social work.

"One would think, however, seeing these judges function, that they were state officials fulfilling an administrative formality, rather than jurists fulfilling a civic duty.

"And yet, actually, among them are all the celebrities of the French magistracy: men who certainly deserve better things than to be buried alive in this sumptuous tomb.

"And on the other hand, the condemned, whoever they may be, who bring their appeals before this Court deserve that the Law which punishes them be observed and controlled.

"If Number 46,635 has known only injustice, it is not because of the judges, but because of an institution which nevertheless calls itself Justice."

Chapter XII

Returned to the Islands—Lanio's End

ABOUT sixty of us convicts were chained together two and two down in the hot hold of the small coasting steamer which calls by the Islands twice a month from Saint Laurent. During that night crossing, the dim light hanging over our heads . . . the silhouettes of the armed guards in the open hatch above us . . . the hot stench in the crowded hold where seasick men lay about on the bare planks or on sacks of cement which were destined for the new lighthouse being built on the Islands . . . and even down to the voice of some wretch singing sadly in a low key—it was just another crossing to the Islands, as miserable as when I first made it in 1925.*

Almost all the men with me deep in that smelly hold had been condemned by the T.M.S. to severe punishments in solitary confinement on dreaded St. Joseph Island. The court, obeying instructions of the new Director of the Administration, who was deluded by the idea that he could stamp out escapes by inflicting terrible punishments, had applied the maximum sentences.

I was chained to one of my former comrades—Albert

* See "Dry Guillotine."

Brun, who was one of the most thoroughly dependable men I'd ever known in Guiana. He had just been given five years solitary confinement for a negligible offense against the Administration, and he knew that he would never leave the nerve-freezing cells on St. Joseph alive. Few men, even in perfect health, could have stood it, and poor Albert had an illness of the bladder. Unfortunate wretch! what business had he to be among convicts! He was just another of those whose lives had gone awry. Years before, he had shown me his record and had asked me to send his story to a Parisian magazine, hoping its publication would result in his pardon. We'd sent the article, but we never had a reply!

Brun had been given three years by a War Council for desertion. In 1917 he was in the central prison of Beaulieu in France. An epidemic of tuberculosis was raging in that fog-bound prison on the damp coast of Brittany. Every day three or four prisoners died of it, and the doctor, who was a veritable brute, took no pains to keep the dreadful disease from spreading to the other prisoners.

It had so happened that not so many years before this, Brun had lost his sister, whom he loved dearly. In a few short days she had been carried off by galloping consumption. She, whom he had seen one week alive in gay spirits, the next week had lain before him dead on her hospital cot! This death had made a vivid impression on his mind. He was in mortal dread of dying as she had died!

At the prison, no one but the doctor himself could be blamed for the dreadful disregard for men's lives. The situation had to be changed, and quickly! Brun decided to make himself martyr to the task. When he presented himself one day to the doctor at the medical inspection, he stabbed him suddenly with a small knife which he'd carefully hidden in his prison uniform. The wound was so slight the doctor didn't even go to the hospital.

To the State Investigator, Albert Brun explained the reason for his act—his motive, he said, had been to make a public issue of the inexcusable lack of sanitation in the prison, and bring about a change of doctors! A lawyer came to see him in his cell and advised him under no condition to tell that to the judges—and he promised he would get Brun a minimum sentence. Brun promised to observe these instructions. But when he stood before his judges, he was swept away by pent-up emotion, and made a public declaration of all that was going on in the Beaulieu prison. Brun was sentenced to die on the guillotine! He certainly deserved a full pardon . . . in any case, the crime he had committed didn't warrant even five years in jail. And they had condemned him to death!

But a week later his death sentence was commuted to a life sentence at hard labor. He endured four more years in the damp prison of Beaulieu, where he was beaten by brutal guards, who in their vengeance kept him perpetually locked up in dungeons. Then in 1922 he was put on the convict ship for Guiana.

Since he'd been in Guiana he had already endured three years in solitary confinement, and now he was going back to the dry guillotine cells of St. Joseph Island for five more years! He could never take those five years of slow death! The illness which had undermined his strength and made him suffer horribly, had sapped his resistance, and he was partly crazed.

"When I feel I'm near the end," he confided to me in the dim, stinking hold, with a gleam in his eye, "I'll get hold of some kind of weapon and I'll kill one of these brutes who've made me suffer so!" I tried to cheer him up as best I could, but it was useless—the poor chap had lost all hope.

The very first guard I met when we were landed on Royal Island was the big brute who'd recognized me aboard the *Biskra* when I left the Colony, and had tried to get me arrested by the Purser!

"*Eh bien*, Belbenoit!" he exclaimed in my face, squaring himself before me. "I told you we'd be meeting again, *non?*" And he added with a sinister laugh: "Here you don't buy bottles of champagne!" Then he ordered a turnkey to frisk me. After this ceremony I was ordered to the Crimson Barrack for incorrigibles.

When I was let into the second block of the Crimson Barrack by the turnkey who unlocked the heavily barred door, I was greeted by several convicts whom I had known four years before. They were all glad to see me. I was surprised to see them in the barrack, instead

of out working and in the barrack courtyard, a machine-gun was set up, with a guard at either side of it. A deep silence reigned all over the island.

"Do you know what has just happened?" one of the men asked me.

"No—what's up?" I demanded. "Why isn't anybody working outside?"

"A guard was killed yesterday on St. Joseph—by a new convict."

"Who did it?"

"Lifer called Lanio!"

"Lanio!—what did they do to him?"

"The guards massacred him and some of his companions!"

Lanio! So he was dead! The young man who had been chained to me in the cage on the *Martinière!* It was a tragic ending.

Lanio, finding life in the cells, loaded with leg-irons and being continually knocked about by the guards, not worth living, had taken the desperate chance of a revolt.

On the 14th of April, he and seven other convicts under the eye of an armed guard were weeding the road which goes all round St. Joseph. It was a Tuesday, the visiting day for the doctor. Lanio had taken two of the gang, Houpin and an Italian, Girolamo, both lifers like himself, into his confidence, and told them of his plan to seize the doctor's boat and put out to sea in it.

At 8 o'clock the boat bringing the doctor from Royal Island arrived and the doctor got out with his two

guards and started towards the prison. The moment the three had disappeared into the buildings, Lanio gave the signal to his accomplice. Houpin at once jumped the guard and gave him a terrific blow on the head. Lanio snatched up the fallen man's revolver, waved it and yelled, "Now for the camp overseer's house," for there, he knew, they would find arms and ammunition.

Only Houpin followed him. Girolamo's courage failed him, and he stayed with the others who had stood staring at what was happening.

Lanio and Houpin dashed into the overseer's house and found his wife in the dining-room. When Lanio threatened her with the pistol and demanded the keys of the arms closet, she ran into the next room, grabbed up her husband's revolver and threatened Lanio with it. The Arab turnkey who acted as Mme. Flottat's servant flung his arms round Lanio, but Houpin in turn put the Arab out with a blow. Suddenly there was a fusillade of shots. Girolamo had betrayed his friends and had given the alarm. Now guards were running from all directions. Lanio and Houpin saw them and realized that all was lost: they rushed out of the house towards the sea, but a dozen shots rang out simultaneously. Lanio fell at once, mortally wounded, and Houpin, also wounded, fell a few yards farther on. The chief guard bent down and holding his rifle touching Lanio's head, he pulled the trigger. As the body lay there, with over thirty wounds in it, Mme. Flottat came up and spat in the dead man's face, hissing "Shark's meat!" The

wounded Houpin meanwhile had been surrounded on the shore, and even while he was holding his hands up in token of surrender, was shot in the back by a German convict who had crawled round behind him.

Girolamo did not live to reap the reward of his treachery. He found that all the convicts knew of it, and he was afraid of ássassination. He dared not sleep, for fear of assassination. So he begged the Commandant of the Island to send him to Royal Island. Even there he felt himself in danger and two days later begged to be put in solitary confinement. The Commandant refused, and the same night the men of the second block of barracks were awakened by a terrible scream. The lamp of the dormitory had been blown out; and when the guard relighted it, Girolamo was gasping his life out, lying across his hammock with three knife-wounds in his body.

The murderer was never found. Lanio was avenged.

Every fifteen days now, there were revolt maneuvers on the island. The alarm would sound, and immediately all the convicts had to get to their barracks on the run, while the guards set up machine-guns and manned them. It was the Director's orders! The almost successful revolt staged by Lanio and his companions on St. Joseph. where every single guard would have been killed, had thoroughly scared the Administration. Now the Penal Colony would be run with ruthless efficiency and rigid discipline.

But savage discipline, for those men whose only hope

lies in escape, can only lead to mass revolt! That same year the new system had produced its natural results. Three guards were killed by convicts, and there were eleven condemned men who paid with their lives for the murders. Whereas, in the previous *ten* years of less regular discipline, only *two* guards had been killed by convicts!

At this time, there on the Islands, an incident occurred which is typical of some of the brutalities which are habitual among the guards. The cable which connects Devil's Island with Royal broke in half, and a guard ordered a convict named Saviory, reputed to be an excellent swimmer, to dive into the water and fish out one of the ends. Saviory refused to do it, saying the sea was too rough. The guard then drew his revolver and threatened to shoot him if he didn't do as commanded! Saviory stripped and plunged into the sea, and the current carried him off! Next day his body, partly devoured by the sharks, was found on some rocks. The guard's murderous command was never questioned. And a few months later, when he completed his twenty years of duty in the Penal Colony, he was recommended for the Military Cross!

One of the strangest cases in the Colony is that of the German, Otto Yentsch. Yentsch knows French Guiana from the point of view of a scientist better than anyone in the world. For ten years he was in charge of the Government Bureau of Information at Cayenne where he

furnished the Government with full details of all the sources and products of the Colony, and he was, moreover, the author of the official handbook of Guiana, issued on the occasion of the Colonial Exposition in 1930.

This man of commanding intelligence, who knew inside-out all the woods, the plants and the soil of the Colony, is now on the Islands because he dared to tell a newspaper man that he had never had a square meal during the twenty years that he had been in Guiana. Yentsch came to the Colony in 1913, having killed his cabin companion on a Hamburg American steamship while in the French port of Dunkerque, for which he received a life sentence. The sole reason for this eminent scientist's being sent to the punishment barracks on the Islands was that the man to whom he made his unfortunate remark about the food supplied to the convicts quoted it afterwards in his book.

Governor Siadous addressed a series of representations to the ministry of the colonies protesting against the continued imprisonment of a man of this type who, throughout his imprisonment, had nothing but the very best conduct record, and had further been of great service to the Government through his scientific knowledge. Finally the Government reviewed Yentsch's case and, instead of a life sentence, handed down a sentence of five years' imprisonment in Guiana.

By a peculiarity of French law, the twenty years he had already served on his life sentence did not count against the new sentence, so he had to begin at the be-

ginning of the new sentence which the provision of *doublage* would extend to ten years.

As Yentsch himself said to me when I last saw him, "I am now fifty-nine years old. I still have two years of my sentence to serve, and then, what will almost certainly prove to be life residence in the Colony. They would have done much better to execute me in 1912. That would have been merciful compared to the punishment I have had."

Chapter XIII

Philipponet, Nourric and Duquesne, Three Victims of a Crooked Public Analyst

ONE morning shortly after I'd been transferred to the Crimson Barrack, the Commandant of the Islands called me to his office. He told me that he was going to give me the job of sweeper of the barrack court.

"Why, Belbenoit, didn't you stay in Panama?" he surprised me by saying. "You were free there and unmolested, and you had a passport! Whatever possessed you to show up again?"

"I'd given my word to Governor Siadous, Commandant." I said.

"Bah! Governor Siadous wouldn't have held anything against you. On the contrary—" he said with an expressive shrug of his broad shoulders.

"And then, besides, I expected to get a pardon."

"Then you shouldn't have done any *writing!*" the Commandant said patiently. "I read your articles in *Police Magazine*. You admitted that when a man's in your position it isn't good sense to tell what goes on in Guiana. Leave that to the reporters, to men who are free! But for you, a convict, hoping for a pardon from French justice, it wasn't good politics."

Locked up in the Crimson Barrack at night I would listen to the stories of convicts who were victims of a judicial error, or of a sentence which was disproportionate to their crime.

The man who slept next to me, Philipponet, was little liked by the other convicts, and I was one of the few men in the barrack with whom he ever talked much. We had a common interest because he was given to writing many protests. He never stopped sending complaints to the higher authorities about the continual brutality of the guards; but, unfortunately, he complained against the convicts also, and they had no use for him. I don't know where that habit might have led him, but I wouldn't be in the least surprised to hear that he'd been stabbed to death!

There were two men, Nourric and Duquesne, in the Crimson Barrack who undoubtedly were innocent. There was not a single convict or even a guard who believed they were guilty, and this is unusual where hundreds of guilty men claim to be innocent. As I understand justice, I think France is the only country which would ever have condemned them to hard labor on the slight evidence against them.

On February 28th, 1927, the tax collector was making his rounds in the village of Perreux, near Paris, where these two men lived. He was seen for the last time headed for their house. And because the next man on the tax list, Daumas, declared in court that the collector had not been to his house, justice concluded that the collector

had been murdered by Nourric and Duquesne. By the time the tax collector got to their house, he had, according to the books, collected 30,000 francs. The villagers were not much in sympathy with these two men. And since the suspects had no way of proving their statements that the collector had made his collection at their house and had gone his way, the court concluded that they had murdered him, for the money.

A month later the body of the tax collector was found washed up on the banks of the Seine River, wrapped in a piece of sacking. A handkerchief was tied about the mouth of the victim.

The world-renowned criminal analyst, Bayle, was given charge of the analysis of the handkerchief, rope and sacking binding the body. He declared these were identical with other such articles found in the home of Nourric and Duquesne! No heed was paid by the court to the statements made by the suspects that they had bought their handkerchiefs at the general store, which sold handkerchiefs to all the other villagers; and as for the rope—it was the same as used by all the hundreds of men who did their kind of work.

Bayle's analysis convinced the court. Nourric and Duquesne, and their wives also, were given life sentences!

A few months after the murder the mistress of the man, Daumas, on whom the tax collector should have called next, told that her lover had committed the crime. Unfortunately, she died—possibly poisoned—before she

could give evidence in court. And Daumas skipped off! Meanwhile, Nourric and Duquesne had already been sentenced, and the matter was closed, so far as the law was concerned. And the two men were sent to Guiana for life!

Nourric and Duquesne were both put on the Islands when they arrived in Guiana in 1929. They were later sent over to the penitentiary in Saint Laurent, whence they escaped within fifteen days. They reached Trinidad and then continued to Colombia, but there they were arrested. Sent back to Guiana, they were given five years each in solitary confinement in the cell-blocks on St. Joseph.

They have never ceased to proclaim their innocence —and nobody doubts them! But their case is closed. Although they never murdered the tax collector in their village in France, they are doomed to wait out their lives in the horrors of St. Joseph.

One night, after he had seen me talking to Nourric and Duquesne, Philipponet asked me from his hammock next to mine, "Did you know it was I who killed that crooked analyst, Bayle?"

"Yes, so Nourric just told me," I said, "but he didn't say what made you do it!"

"Nobody around here knows that, except me. Bayle made a crooked analysis against me—just as he did against Nourric and Duquesne. I had bought some furniture from a landlord; and when I found that he'd charged me 30,000 francs for what wasn't worth 10,-

000, I took him to court. There the seller denied absolutely that he had demanded 30,000 francs, and submitted as evidence a bill-of-sale in which the amount specified was 10,000 francs.

"I hired an expert who demonstrated that the '3' of the 30,000 had been changed to a '1.' So the defendant called in Bayle, who not only had the effrontery to say that his chemical analysis of the writing showed that no change had been made in the figures but also that his experiments had completely destroyed the document.

"I lost my case but gained 20,000 francs by losing it. Knowing that Bayle, the dirty crook, had taken money from the landlord to say the bill hadn't been altered, I shot him dead!"

Philipponet had been sentenced to death for shooting Bayle. The newspapers, however, showed conclusively that at other times, too, the expert had taken bribes, which had decided his analysis of criminal evidence. So Philipponet's death sentence was commuted to a life sentence at hard labor. Lying there in his hammock that night beside me, he declared he had never for a minute regretted his act. "He had it coming to him, and I saw that he got it. The law could never have caught *him!*" he finished bitterly.

Chapter XIV

Seznec, a Second Dreyfus

I FOUND there in the Crimson Barrack of the incorrigibles a withered old companion in suffering whom I'd known before on the Islands. This was Guillaume-Marie Seznec, the second Dreyfus of the Penal Colony, a wretched innocent who has perhaps suffered as much mental torture and physical abuse as Dreyfus himself ever did.

Dreyfus had, at least, the good fortune of seeing his injustice washed clean. He had had his Zola . . . while Seznec's injustice still continues to blacken his name. In Dreyfus' case the honor of the French Army was at stake, and to save that honor, he came near being sacrificed. In Seznec's case the honor of French Justice is at stake . . . and Justice doesn't hesitate to let him be sacrificed for its blunder. For in France there is a principle in law which contends, "In matters of Justice there can be no error," and French Justice has never admitted failure—except on two occasions when it had to admit publicly that it was in error. The first of these occasions was the famous Dreyfus case when the entire world became indignant at its injustice, and the second occasion

was the Danval case. In this last case, however, its honor was not at stake.*

The Seznec affair has made much ink flow in France. His innocence is no longer a matter about which there is any doubt, nevertheless he is still in Guiana. He will probably die there, like those others whose innocence was recognized by justice *after they were dead*. He will be rehabilitated when he is dead and his descendants will receive, by way of moral atonement, a small sum of money as recompense. It's the way in France! It establishes the proof of the legal principle in France that, "In matters of Justice there can be no error."

I had known Seznec intimately for many long years. When, as the unlucky star of the convoy of 678 convicts he had come to Guiana in May of 1927, I had made friends with him and now, one night in the Crimson Barrack, under the light of a couple of dim little lamps, which showed us vaguely the forms of the sixty sleeping convicts, Seznec, his hammock spread with letters carrying thousands of signatures of members of the *League of the Rights of Man* from practically every town in France, white-haired Seznec, his withered hand stirring the papers as he spoke, and his eyes full of tears, told me his story.

In 1921, on the 25th of May, Seznec was driving in

* Danval, pharmacist accused of having poisoned his wife with arsenic, was sentenced to hard labor for life. Ten years later Dr. Roux of the Pasteur Institute in Paris discovered that the human body always contains arsenic. This knowledge constituted a new fact in Danval's case. He obtained a revision, and after twelve years as a convict he was repatriated in France and rehabilitated.

his car from Brittany to Paris with his influential friend, Pierre Quémeneur, General Counselor for the Department of Finistère. They were going to Paris to buy up a fleet of Cadillac trucks left over from the war, which were being sold at a bargain by an American named Sherdy.

By nine o'clock in the evening they had got as far as Houdan where they took their supper in an inn, which they left at ten minutes past ten. Thirty-five minutes later Seznec arrived *alone* at Queue des Evelines, a little village ten miles farther on, where he spent the night in a hotel after garaging his car.

In the morning he continued his journey towards Paris, but having had a very serious puncture, he repaired it, then turned around and went back to Brittany.

Quémeneur was never seen again.

When inquiries were made, Seznec declared that his friend had parted from him at Houdan because of the number of blowouts they had had and intended to take the train to Paris from there.

Time went on. On the tenth of June Quémeneur's family received the following telegram dated Havre and signed Quémeneur: "I shall not be back for several days. Everything is going splendidly. Quémeneur."

The same day the police found a suitcase which had been left by somebody in the Havre railway station. This suitcase turned out to be Quémeneur's. It contained his clothes and a bill-of-sale for some land, the buyer being Seznec. It also came to light that the day

on which the telegram was sent from Havre, Seznec was away from home all day. The family of the victim, when they heard of the bill-of-sale of the property, immediately accused Seznec of having murdered Quémeneur not only to rob him but also to get possession of his property, for the consideration in the bill-of-sale was thirty thousand francs, and the property was valued at more than four times that sum. When the bill-of-sale was submitted to scrutiny by experts, it turned out to be a forgery, and Seznec was immediately arrested on the charge of having assassinated his friend Quémeneur on the night of May twenty-fifth between ten minutes past ten and a quarter to eleven.

In addition to the above facts, the following points were alleged against him: His financial status was desperate. It was, in consequence, obvious that the mysterious Sherdy and the purchase of the Cadillac cars must have been invented by Seznec.

Witnesses testified to having seen Seznec in Havre on the day that the telegram was sent. A witness testified to having sold Seznec a "Royal" typewriter; and from trials made with it, it was clear that this was the machine which typed the forged bill-of-sale.

Eight days after Seznec's arrest, the police found the typewriter hidden in a hangar belonging to him.

Last of all, a stool pigeon, who had been placed in his cell with him, sent the examining magistrate a letter written secretly by Seznec to his wife, in which he begged her to secure witnesses who would, for a con-

sideration, testify to having seen him at home on the day that he was supposed to have been in Havre. This was the last straw. In spite of his frantic denials in court, he was sentenced to hard labor for life for the murder of Pierre Quémeneur.

In other words, Seznec was accused of having murdered his friend and of having got rid of the body so carefully that, in spite of every conceivable search made by the police, it was never found, and, at the same time, of having driven ten miles in his old broken-down car.

All of this in thirty-five minutes!

Surely this is a record for swiftness and precision in murder!

A murder without a corpse, and done, no one knows where, no one knows how.

As time went on, the case against Seznec began to fall to pieces, and the evidence on which he had been condemned was much of it found to be either biased or false.

Seznec had owned a laundry at Brest during the war and had the contract for doing the laundry of the American soldiers in the port. Advised by his wife, he insisted on payment in American gold dollars, and by the end of the war had accumulated a very substantial sum in gold which he and his wife intended to invest in country real estate.

Quémeneur, on his part, owned several hundred acres of unimproved land but had no money in hand, so that

when the deal in Cadillacs seemed to offer a quick turnover, then he proposed to Seznec to sell him his real estate for thirty thousand francs, knowing that Seznec, at this time, had at least sixty thousand francs in American gold.

The duplicate of the bill-of-sale, found in Quémeneur's suitcase at Havre, Seznec turned over to his wife on the twenty-fourth of May, before starting for Paris. When the signatures on the bill of sale were pronounced forgeries by the experts, Madame Seznec sent her copy to the magistrate for inspection and never got it back.

Some weeks before the verdict was given in Seznec's trial, a group of sailors appeared before the justice of the peace at Pontrieux, a little village near the real estate which Quémeneur had sold to Seznec, and made a declaration before him that during the night of the twenty-seventh or twenty-eighth of May, they had witnessed what they thought was a murder on the property referred to. They had heard several revolver shots and seen a man run away and then fall. There was one more revolver shot, and after that, dead silence. Having read of the Seznec affair in the papers, they had made up their minds to tell their story to the judge, for they all thought that it must have been Quémeneur who was being murdered on his own property.

The magistrate, Monsieur Hervé, drew up an official account of these depositions, made in the presence of the local police superintendent, and sent the documents to the Assize Court at Rennes. These documents did not

appear in the evidence, and no notice was taken of them by the judges.

Some years later, the magistrate, Hervé, was made examining magistrate, and then attempted to discover what had become of these documents which, in his opinion, would have necessitated a new trial for the unhappy Seznec, who was by then in Guiana. He addressed several reports on the subject to his superiors who tried to discourage him, and asked him to let the matter rest. Finally, as he persisted, his superiors pronounced him broken down from overwork and had him retired to a sanitarium. As soon as he got out, Hervé resigned his position as magistrate and gave himself up entirely to proving the innocence of Seznec.

The first thing he did was to discover the American, Sherdy, who explained his failure to appear in court by saying that he had not been subpœnaed, and that he did not care to voluntarily mix himself up in a foreign murder case.

He also found a life-long friend of Quémeneur's who swore to having met Quémeneur in Paris the twenty-sixth of May, that is to say, the day after Seznec was accused of having murdered him. He had talked with him several minutes on that occasion. Also, the former mayor of Landerneau, his home town, swore to having met Quémeneur on the twenty-seventh of May in the street, of having waved his hand to him, to which Quémeneur had answered with a similar gesture.

All of these witnesses had testified at the trial, but not

the slightest notice had been taken of their testimony, as the crowd and the newspapers were all howling for Seznec's blood, and evidence in his favor was not wanted.

Confirming the evidence of Quémeneur's survival to the twenty-eighth of May at least, a taxi driver deposed that on that date he had driven a man to Plourivo, Quémeneur's property, who had told him that he was going there to have the woodcutting stopped.

Who was in a position to order the woodcutting stopped except the proprietor, Quémeneur himself?

The witnesses who claimed to have seen Seznec at Havre the day when the telegram had been sent and the vendor of the typewriter were also sought out and interrogated. The vague descriptions of the person they had seen pointed somewhat in the direction of Seznec but might equally have applied to Quémeneur. It was also proved that Seznec's financial situation was not in any way desperate or even uncomfortable, for, without counting the American dollars, which he had paid Quémeneur and no trace of which had ever been found, it was proved that he had deposited a check for five thousand francs in his bank the very day that he started for Paris with Quémeneur.

Again, a check on a Paris bank, sent to Quémeneur the day of his departure from Landerneau, had been cashed in Paris on the twenty-sixth of May. By whom? Only Seznec, Quémeneur and the sender of the check knew of its sending. Seznec had not gone to Paris at all,

for his movements were provable throughout. The sender of the check had not been in Paris. Who, then, could have cashed it except Quémeneur himself?

Seeing that the evidence on which Seznec had been condemned for life had been thoroughly broken down, Hervé demanded a new trial for the unfortunate man, but the law turned a deaf ear and nothing was done. Then Hervé published a pamphlet at his own expense at the time of the Seznec incident. It made a sensation, for it showed why the evidence at the trial had been handled in such a peculiar manner.

Quémeneur's family was a very influential one in that part of Brittany, and it became clear that Seznec was really found guilty because, if he had been acquitted, the family of Quémeneur would not have been able to touch the dead man's estate. Since the body was not found, and has not been found to this day, no legal proof existed that he was dead.

And the judge, who so recklessly sentenced Seznec, was a friend of the Quémeneur family.

Starting with Hervé's pamphlet, the Seznec affair gradually became more and more a theme for discussion all over France. Meetings were held, pamphlets were published and in the newspapers, from time to time, appeared leaders headed, "Seznec is innocent," or "Give us back Seznec." The matter, in fact, was nothing more or less than a public scandal, but Seznec is in Guiana today, and he will die there.

His wife, whose devotion is one of the things that

turned opinion in his favor, sent him a telegram on the day that he embarked for Guiana:

"News of your departure received too late for me to get there. Be happy, my William. There is nothing so fine as the death of a martyr. You are taking my heart with you. I shall never abandon you. The fight will go on. I will persevere until death. There can be no good-by between us.

Marie Jeanne."

The devoted woman saw her family dispersed and her own fortunes crumble and become desperate. One daughter, Marie, became a nun but died a few months later before she reached the age of eighteen. A younger sister tried to follow the elder's example but was too delicate to stand convent life. The boy was put in a home; and Madame Seznec, after selling everything she possessed, finally took a position as a servant in somebody else's house, where she did the cooking and scrubbed floors so that she could send a little money every month to her martyred husband. In 1930 she died in Paris in a public hospital ward, just at the time when the Seznec affair was beginning to become a national scandal.

When Seznec was landed in Guiana, instead of being put in the favored class, as is usual for important criminals when they first come out, Seznec, because he was condemned for the murder of an influential official, was put on the very hardest work that could be found from

the moment of his arrival. After about seven months of cutting down huge trees and rolling heavy trunks along the bank of the Maroni in the blazing sun, one day when he went to buy some food in the village of the *libérés* down by the water front, a guard picked him up on the charge of trying to escape, and accused him also of speaking insultingly.

Seznec was thrown into the Blockhouses, for this fifteen minutes of absence, when the regulation specified twelve hours! He wrote a letter of protest, but was kept in detention in cell and blockhouse for ten months before the T.M.S. acquitted him of both charges. The guard who had made these charges against him was from Brittany also, and he had been prompted by a desire to be able to say he'd punished the famous Seznec, when he returned home on his next leave!

After ten months of that killing life in the Blockhouses, Seznec was sent to the Islands in December of 1928. For several months the Administration set him to the worst and hardest tasks. Then an order came from the Director saying he was to be given easier work, for the people of France were up in arms in his behalf, and the Administration had no wish to have him die in the prison colony, and draw the fire of the press once more.

So Seznec was employed as house-man in the guards' living quarters and settled down to a life of comparative ease. Then, one morning in 1932, the Commandant received a note from a turnkey named Carpentier saying

Seznec was about to escape from Royal in a canoe which he had all ready and well hidden.

The Commandant ordered a search made, and they discovered in Seznec's room several oil cans filled with provisions. And, in his box of personal effects they found a sum of 2,500 francs! The turnkey was evidently right, for the mere presence of those cans filled with food revealed Seznec's intentions! So he was at once sent to the barracks. Since he had not actually tried to escape yet, the Commandant could not punish him. But there was nothing to prevent the Commandant from pocketing the money, for the regulations do not permit a convict to have any! As for the canoe, they could find no trace of it. The turnkey, however, insisted that there was one. He told the Commandant he was certain it was somewhere on the island, because he'd read a note of Seznec's which said he had a good canoe and that all was ready for an attempt.

About a week later the guard in charge of the bachelors' mess was sitting in the garden behind the house, discussing the mystery of Seznec's canoe with another guard, when his eyes wandered over the small privy which stood against the wall at the end of the garden. An idea suddenly came to him. He jumped up and dashed over to the privy. Sure enough, he had solved the mystery!

He sent word to the Commandant to come over. It was a perfect canoe! The back of it, which had rested close against the wall of the garden, had a keel. At the

top end was a watertight compartment, in which was found a rolled-up sail.

"It was Seznec, himself, who offered to make this privy!" the guard said in great excitement to the Commandant. "But I never thought he'd be making himself a canoe, *here* in this garden and while we were actually watching him."

Seznec was brought to the garden, and he confessed that, as a matter of fact, he had intended to escape with the canoe. He declared to the Commandant:

"You, Sir, who read all my correspondence before it's given me, know, yourself, that for a long time now they have promised to see that I get back to France for a revision of my case. But the time never arrives! There is no longer any doubt of my innocence, but I'm still here! That's why I tried!"

In 1934, when he told me his story, he had been promoted to Keeper of the Crimson Barrack.

For eighteen years now, Seznec has suffered the mental and physical torture of that unparalleled Hell known as French Guiana. His family is destroyed. His name dishonored.—How much longer must he wait!

He is now more than sixty years old, and his hair is white. He is completely broken—ruined by a monstrous judicial error which has been damned in the eyes of the entire world.

Chapter XV

The Strange Case of Jean Alban Courrèges

IN HIS famous book, "*Les dessous de l'espionnage anglais*," (Revelations concerning the British Spy-system) Robert Boucart tells how, during the war, certain individuals in the town of Tarbes in the south of France were enticing French soldiers to desert, and go over into Spain where work, they stated, was plentiful and well paid.

The French Secret Service got wind of this, and sent six agents of the Allied counter-espionage to Tarbes. These agents pretended to be spies, and proposed in their turn offers of desertion to the men of the Tenth Hussars, who were stationed there. All the soldiers are supposed to have refused with indignation, except one.

Robert Boucart says:

"One soldier, however, Jean Alban Courrèges, aged thirty-three years, accepted without distrust the money of the enticers, and bragged that he had been entrusted with a mission by the German Consul stationed at Barcelona. He was to start next day for Spain, accompanied by a guide and by another man whose acquaintance he had recently made.

"Courrèges carried his imprudence to the point of revealing the route which would take him into Spain.

"This trustfulness was his undoing.

"On the following day, at the hour indicated, the six investigators had gathered, hidden and fully armed, near the mule trail leading to the border.

"The night was pitch black and the sky was charged with threatening clouds. A few moments before the spies took their stations a storm of extreme violence broke out. This made it possible for Courrèges and his companions to get by unseen, hidden by the fury of the elements. They had already set foot on Spanish soil when the detectives realized their blunder.

"There was not a moment to lose, and the English and French detectives hurried in pursuit of the fugitives. They overtook them at a turn of the mountain trail and opened a sustained fire on them.

"Of the three, two succeeded, wounded or not, in escaping. Only Jean Alban Courrèges, who was the one most heavily burdened, was captured three kilometers from the French border.

"No Spanish customs officer had witnessed this affair, and the matter was carefully kept secret. Luckily, there is no harm done by divulging it today.

"Brought back to Tarbes, Courrèges sobbed in his cell for several days. During this time an examination was made of the contents of the sack which had paralyzed the flight of the criminal hussar. It contained:

"1. A bundle of valuable documents.
"2. Two sights for machine guns of the newest model.
"3. Fifty photographs taken secretly on the French front.
"4. The model of a gas mask which in three months would be issued to the French troops.

"Brought before the War Council of the 18th Region, the Frenchman, Jean Alban Courrèges, was sentenced to die and a few days later he fell under the bullets of the firing squad, without admitting any regrets for his act of infamy.

"And the father of the traitor died not long afterwards, his heart eaten out by the shame and grief."

Only the *last two lines* of the foregoing are true. The father of the unfortunate Courrèges did die of a broken heart, when he learned the double lie that his son had been shot down before a firing squad and had been a traitor to his country. But the rest of the story is shamefully and grossly untrue!

Jean Alban Courrèges is *still alive*. He is in the Hell of Guiana today—an innocent man. I knew him well, and we almost escaped together in 1935.

The following is, fact for fact, the true account of what happened.

In 1913 the French Secret Service sent Jean Alban Courrèges on several missions of counter-espionage to Germany and to Luxembourg. On his return to France he left the service to get married and set himself up in private business.

At the outbreak of the World War his wife had a position as a governess in the home of a Frenchwoman who was married to a German. The German crossed into Spain. Asked by his wife to look into the husband's affairs, Courrèges discovered that the man was an officer in the German Army, and he made known his discov-

ery to the French Secret Service. An inspector, named Bioret, went to the house and seized all the papers and documents belonging to the German officer.

Two months later Courrèges saw the German back in Paris. He was wearing the uniform of a soldier of the Foreign Legion, and Courrèges learned through inquiries that the man had enlisted in the Legion, had been wounded by an accident behind the lines, and, for the present, was invaliding in Paris.

He discovered further that this German was only one of many such in Paris, and that there was an entire organization of such foreigners in the capital, where they were free to operate—supposedly recovering from wounds received fighting in the trenches! These foreigners wearing the French uniform were spying for their country! Some invisible power was obviously protecting the organization.

To put an end to this scandalous state of affairs, Courrèges, by agreement with an official of the French Secret Service, wrote an article entitled *Contre la Bocherie* which was published in the Paris paper, *La Liberté,* over the name of the editor, M. Berthoulat.

The article aroused the public. And a few days later Austrians and Germans were excluded from enlistment in the Foreign Legion!

On February 20, 1915, Courrèges was conscripted and drafted to the Tenth Hussars in Tarbes in the south of France, near the Spanish border. Before he left Paris, Inspector Bioret of the Secret Service said to him: "We

are being betrayed, and we haven't been able to uncover all the spies. If down there at Tarbes you spot anything, let us know. We'll manage to keep you under cover."

After some months had gone by, Courrèges met a Spaniard in Tarbes named Lopez whom he'd known in Strasbourg before the outbreak of the war, where the fellow had kept a restaurant. In the course of their long conversations, the fellow imprudently hinted to Courrèges that he was in the pay of the German Consul stationed at Saint Sebastian.

Courrèges immediately denounced him to the Public Prosecutor, Bordes, who said it was out of his jurisdiction and advised him to make known his discovery to the military authorities of the town. In the offices of the Chief of Staff, Colonel Thiébault and his aide, Lieutenant Dariès, heard his declaration with great interest. Immediately, from his description, they sent a wire to the station agent at Hendaye on the border, reporting the spy. And they verbally instructed Courrèges to obtain the fullest information about him, and especially to learn the names of the persons with whom he was friendly and the reasons for his trips between Tarbes and Saint Sebastian, for they could not arrest the Spaniard without definite proof, since he was a subject of a neutral nation.

After eight days Courrèges came to the headquarters office again and informed Lieutenant Dariès that, later that same day, he would have the details he had demanded about the spy, for Courrèges was to have lunch

that very day with the man and two of his friends who worked in a munitions plant.

Being in a great hurry, Lieutenant Dariès said to him: "I am obliged to leave immediately with my Chief, and shall not have time today to look after this matter. But do everything you possibly can to get the information, and come back to see me tomorrow morning."

But unfortunately the spy, Lopez, had to leave that same night for Saint Sebastian where he was expected. It was urgent to discover what he was going to do there and whom he was to meet at the border village of Pau. Courrèges considered it his duty to follow the spy, and that Lieutenant Dariès would want him to, so he didn't hesitate to do so.

To get into the confidence of Lopez, Courrèges had told him that he intended to desert, and that he had the blue prints of a machine-gun sight of the latest model, which he would let him have. Through his connections with the counter-espionage service, Courrèges knew the system of fooling the enemy agents with fake documents. In the case of this ignorant and credulous Lopez he didn't have to resort to anything more original than the old well-worn scheme of offering the drawings of a machine-gun sight and its accessories, all of which he had already submitted for approval of their use as bait to Colonel Dandelot, director of the technical division of artillery of the Ministry of War. He knew from this officer that these drawings had absolutely no value.

Now, to accompany Lopez on the trip, Courrèges

had to be dressed in civilian clothes, so he borrowed the clothes and papers of M. Doussines, who with his wife owned the Café de l'Europe in Tarbes. Madame Doussines obligingly let down the legs of the trousers to fit him, as they were too short for him.

He required also a pass in order to cross the border. These passes could be obtained in blank at the Police Station. Madame Doussines sent her son to get a couple and he obtained them without difficulty. Madame Doussines filled out one of them in her husband's name, giving Hendaye as the destination.

Courrèges left with Lopez. Along the way, being in his close confidence, he gathered valuable information on the method of operation of the new German spy system in Saint Sebastian which had just begun functioning.

The moment they arrived at Hendaye, Courrèges went to the gendarmes on duty at the station and requested permission to pass into Spain and go to Saint Sebastian. He showed them his papers, belonging to M. Doussines. The gendarmes refused him the permit. He then sought the superintendent of the railway station and asked him whether he had not received a telegram from official sources concerning a Spanish spy. The official assured him that he had received nothing. Courrèges was amazed at this, because the telegram had been sent under his own eyes. He, himself, had dictated the description of the spy Lopez!

Not being able to go on to Saint Sebastian, he decided

then to get back to Tarbes. He was in possession of priceless information which he wanted to communicate immediately to Lieutenant Dariès. But at the moment he was about to get on the train the police arrested him! So he immediately declared his real identity. He told them the reasons which had pressed him to leave his regiment, temporarily, and requested them to communicate at once with Lieutenant Dariès. They refused to comply, evidently taking his story as a bluff. Instead, they locked him up and took away from him everything he possessed.

A few days later he was transferred to the prison at Tarbes. Lieutenant Dariès, informed of his arrest, came to see him immediately. Courrèges explained to him why he had followed Lopez and told him all the information he had obtained from the spy, emphasizing the fact that in Pau, Lopez had been in communication with an important official of the town. At a later date this particular official was exposed in connection with a spy case in which he was deeply implicated.

Lieutenant Dariès replied: "Good! Now you will have to be questioned, so tell all this to the officer who cross-examines you; and ask him to permit you to communicate immediately the information which you have in your possession to the counter-espionage service."

But Courrèges was not cross-examined at Tarbes, as he had expected to be. The next morning he was transferred to the military prison at Bordeaux, and his first cross-examination did not take place until a month later.

In the meantime, he was held as a secret prisoner and was not allowed to communicate with anyone.

As soon as his cross-examination began, he requested that his examiners communicate with Lieutenant Dariès. They refused to comply. He requested again to be allowed to communicate with the bureau of counter-espionage in Paris. This also they refused to allow him to do!

At Tarbes an investigation was made by the police of the town. The police officer who had delivered the blank passes to the Doussines boy had had no business to do so. And it was undoubtedly at his insistence that the Doussines reported that Courrèges had stolen the pass and M. Doussines' clothes.

After a summary examination, Courrèges was brought before a Courtmartial on an accusation of: Theft—Forgery—Use of forged identity papers—Trafficking with the enemy!

As his hearing progressed, Colonel Bonnefoy who presided at the Courtmartial, was struck by the manner in which the case had been conducted, and spoke up: "I fail to understand," he said, "when it involves the life of a man, why the essential points have been neglected. Why has Lieutenant Dariès not been questioned?"

The counsel for Courrèges laid before the Court the following statements of fact:

1. That in July 1915, Courrèges told M. Bordes, Public Prosecutor at Tarbes, of a Spanish spy in the pay of Ger-

many, and that, further following the advice of M. Bordes, he told Lieutenant Dariès of the spy.

2. That, in July 1915, he had disclosed to Lieutenant Dariès the presence of a Spanish spy in the pay of Germany and verbal instructions were given him to obtain information.

3. That, Colonel Dandelot, of the technical division of artillery, had stated that the blue prints of the machine-gun sight were of no value.

The defense requested that Bordes, Dariès and Dandelot be called as witnesses. *This request was not granted!* And on that day, December 10, 1915, by a vote of five to two, Courrèges was condemned to die.

Ten days later, the French press announced that the traitor Jean Alban Courrèges, accused of communicating with the enemy, had been shot by a firing squad at Bordeaux!

Strange things happen in spy circles. Shortly after his sentence was passed, Courrèges was transferred secretly to another prison and placed in strict isolation. Even his requests to be allowed to correspond with his family were not granted!

And thus the days passed. Every morning, when he heard the sound of footsteps, he wondered if they were coming to take him for his last walk.

This torture lasted forty-three days!

Then it was announced to him that the members of his Courtmartial had, of their own accord, asked for his pardon, and that his sentence had been commuted to a

life sentence at hard labor. But, since to the world outside he had been executed, he was not to communicate with anyone until the War was over.

Meanwhile, however, one of the members of the Court martial, who had voted not guilty at his trial, and who had interested himself in his predicament, had succeeded in obtaining for him copies of the documents in the case. Here Courrèges found actual proof of his innocence.

The Prosecutor Bordes, questioning the Doussines couple, who had accused Courrèges of stealing the identity papers and the clothes, had asked the following:

Why did you send your son to get two blank passes?
Answer: To go to Bagnères de Bigorre next day with my wife.

Why did you *not* go to Bagnères; and why did you not discover that the passes had disappeared until after the arrest of Courrèges?

Answer: We didn't go to Bagnères next day because my wife was sick. As for the passes, I didn't discover the theft until the police came to ask me if it was true that I had lent my papers to Courrèges. I had left them in a box into which I seldom look.

Now, the passes had been filled out by Madame Doussines in the presence of Madame Sicard, who lived in the house, and she had put in as destination the town of *Hendaye* and not Bagnères! These passes were full proof of the falsity of the statements of these witnesses, and immediately Courrèges lodged his complaints with the

French League of the Rights of Man, and at the same time with the courts at Tarbes, Bordeaux and Paris. The answers which came back to him were disastrous! It was revealed that the passes had been returned after his trial to M. Doussines, who had claimed them. This most vital and important evidence—the definite proof of his innocence—had disappeared!

However, Courréges did not lose hope. A few months after the War was over he succeeded in locating Lieutenant Dariès who, demobilized from the Army, was now living in Madiran, a town in the Lower Pyrenees. Courrèges wrote him a letter in which he asked him these questions:

1. Is it true that on Sunday, the 8th or 9th of August, 1915, I came to you and informed you that I was going to have lunch with a spy and two of his friends, and that I expected on that same day to procure important information?

2. Is it true that after my arrest you came to see me in my cell and advised me to put myself in touch with the counter-espionage service in order to communicate to that bureau the information I had discovered?

To these two questions Lieutenant Dariès replied: "It is strictly true." And he emphasized this statement by adding: "*I recall that, being in a great hurry, because I had to leave with my Chief, who was just going on a trip, I told Courrèges to come back to see me next morning.*" And he ended his reply saying, "Your cross-

examinations and the whole affair of your trial were entirely unknown to me." Courrèges succeeded also in obtaining a statement written by Colonel Dandelot, certifying that the blue prints of the machine-gun sight and its parts were entirely valueless, and adding further that in 1915 there was no French machine-gun equipped with sights!

Courrèges sent copies of these statements to the Ministry of Justice, requesting a retrial. The Ministry replied to his request with the traditional answer: "*For a retrial new evidence is necessary.*" And in 1921—an innocent man!—he was put on the convict ship and sent to Guiana!

Four years later—in 1925—a possibility of freedom for him finally appeared. The Parisian newspaper *L'Ère Nouvelle* started a campaign to prove his innocence. In July it dug up the facts of his case and published them. However, the shameful abuse he had suffered was not fully exposed because all the evidence of his innocence was not available. Later, that same month, the paper further published a statement by the magistrate who had been in charge of the investigation of his case a few years before, and who now unhesitatingly declared Courrèges innocent, ending his letter with the stirring words:

"This is a magistrate speaking. This letter is the outcry of a conscience. What are those who so carelessly condemned him waiting for? For him to die?

(signed) J. F. LOUIS MERLET."

That declaration by a responsible official who was in a position to know all the facts was published by the press fourteen years ago—in 1925! But France is still "waiting for him to die." Today Courrèges is *still* at Devil's Island!

On his arrival there in 1921, Courrèges was isolated on the Islands for ten years. He was soon put to work as bookkeeper for the victualing service for the men on the Islands, and had the full responsibility of handling the supplies for the 800 convicts interned on all three Islands, an important and lucrative job, for the officials of the Administration of every rank, from the Commandant down to the guards who distributed their meals to the convicts, could not work their graft without his knowledge and his assistance. Since Courrèges alone knew what they stole from the food stocks and was obliged to juggle the figures continually, they allowed him a small share in order to bribe him to cover up their graft which he was helpless to stop, even had he dared to!

Later, Courrèges' life sentence was commuted to one of twenty-five years.

One day, in 1929, just before Governor Siadous transferred me from the Islands to Cayenne, I found Courrèges sitting on the barrack steps holding his head in his hands. I put my hand on his shoulder. He glanced up at me dully and held out a sheet of paper. "The irony of it!" he exclaimed bitterly.

Justice had suddenly been kind to him! He had been given a reduction of 4 years in his 25-year sentence.

Yes, the irony of it was monstrous! *A reduction of four years for a man who was innocent!* Finally, in 1932, he received another 4-year remission, accompanied by a release from hard labor. But under the law of *doublage* he has to remain to the day of his death a *libéré* in the Penal Colony.

Now a *libéré* exiled in that lost colony, what could he do to support himself? He could do nothing but wait, with what patience he could muster, for France to acknowledge his innocence, while he became destitute like all the other *libérés* there, turned out to starve and rot!

When, in the spring of the year 1935, I began to prepare my escape, I planned to take Courrèges, my sterling comrade of long standing, as well as my friend Dadar.*

But a few weeks before our plans were ready, he had a new ray of hope. Robert Boucart, who had published the damaging story of his affair in "*Le dessous de l'espionnage anglais*," had written him a letter asking his forgiveness for his unintentional wrong, and assuring him that he was working up a campaign with the intention of repairing the injustice of which Courrèges had been the victim. So Courrèges decided to stay in Guiana and stake his chances on Boucart's help.

When later, that same year, we safely reached Trini-

* See "Dry Guillotine."

dad, I doubly regretted he'd been left behind—especially since nothing was ever done about his case.

Two years later, in July of 1937, Courrèges did escape, and reached the island of Trinidad, where the local papers published several articles about his exceptional case. Unfortunately, in August, 1938, the British Government decided to send back to Guiana all the fugitives collected on the island, their number now having passed two hundred.

Courrèges was shipped back to Saint Laurent, where the T.M.S. sentenced him in November of that year to a year's hard labor for escaping, so back he was sent to the Islands as a convict.

On January 5th of 1939, this year in which I am writing, the important Parisian paper, *Gringoire*, said:

"Robert Boucart, the spy-case specialist who, more than fifteen years ago, announced in his book "*Le dessous de l'espionnage anglais*" the death of Courrèges under the bullets of a firing squad, speaks again about Courrèges, but this time in a different manner:

" 'Frightful mistakes have been made by our Courtsmartial in wartime.

" 'Fifteen years ago, basing my opinion on the documents in the archives of the Council of War, I related the case of the unfortunate Courrèges. Since then, I have had the occasion to meet some of the men who were involved in his case. All affirmed to me the innocence of this unfortunate man. I have examined his case-record, have put myself in relation with Courrèges, have seen those who knew him, and have realized that a frightful error was made.'

"M. Boucart continues:

" 'I called on the Ministry. I was told, with the kindliest smiles, that wartime cases could not be revised. That the Courrèges case was "closed," that is to say, *forever sealed.*

" 'This man who, without respite and with super-human courage for twenty-three years has beaten his head against the slabs of his grave, deserves that his cry of distress be heard!

" 'Six months ago Courrèges, a refugee in Trinidad, told me he intended to return to France to place himself in the hands of the French authorities and demand the revision of his case.

"But he was sent back to Guiana and on his arrival was thrown into a dungeon.

" 'The Hell has taken back its prey.

" 'And this innocent man has already endured twenty-three years of prison for an act of treason which he never committed!

" 'Twenty-three years for attempting to serve his country well!

" 'Here is a work for humanity to do!

" 'This innocent man must be wrenched from the Guiana Hell.

" 'The truth must burst forth.' "

The day after the above article appeared, a letter reached M. Boucart, which the *Gringoire* printed that same day—January 12, 1939. The letter was from former Governor Bernard Siadous, and he says:

"When I was Governor of French Guiana, I had occasion to employ Courrèges in the government offices. He

gave proof of intelligence and application in his work. Courrèges told me the circumstances which brought him before the Courtmartial. He affirmed his innocence to me. I had no means of verifying what he said, or of having a new examination of his case made. I could do no more in his behalf than propose reductions of his sentence, and that is what I did. If you have obtained the proof of Courrèges' innocence, I beseech you to interest the authorities who hold his fate in their hands. And let the Penal Administration realize, for its part, that it has in its hands an innocent man, and that any further severities imposed on him will be a monstrous inhumanity which cannot for long remain hidden.

(signed) Bernard Siadous."

This appeared in January of 1939. But fourteen years ago, *L'Ère Nouvelle* published similar evidence! One reads . . . and then soon forgets! Courrèges is still lying in his dungeon, innocent and twice condemned by medieval justice. And France boasts itself a Democracy!

Chapter XVI

The Leper Island—Gégène—A Leper's Vengeance

IN THE early spring of 1935 when I was making plans to escape by sea, many of the men in the Colony came to make me propositions to take them with me, offering to pay their part in the adventure. But I preferred to choose the men who would go with me, knowing from experience that the caliber of one's companions in an escape is one of the principal factors of success.

A *libéré* named Casquette, whom I had known for many years, proposed to put at my disposal his big dugout with which he fished for sea turtles, on the condition that he could go with me. The offer was tempting. Casquette was not a bad devil, and I knew that his dugout was the nearest to seaworthy in Saint Laurent.

I accepted the offer.

He had hidden his dugout on the leper island and he proposed that we go look at it.

Convicts stricken with leprosy are kept on the little island of Saint Louis. Three kilometers south of Saint Laurent, in the very middle of the muddy waters of the Maroni River, you can see it—an oblong of steaming jungle several hundred yards long by eighty wide.

The Indians give this cursed island a wide berth when they pass up and down the river. No one is allowed to approach it, but sometimes at night dugouts go out to the forbidden island. These are the *libérés* who steal out to visit their friends, and to buy for a trifle the eggs laid by the lepers' hens, which they resell in Saint Laurent cheaper than anyone else. Sometimes a *libéré* who has committed a theft in Saint Laurent slips over to the island to hide what he has stolen—certain that no one will go there to look for it!

Each morning a launch manned by a guard and a turnkey approaches the island. The turnkey throws on the bank a sack containing the food for the day, then the boat returns without having landed. Once a month only, a doctor visits the lepers. His visit lasts only a few minutes. What could he do against this disease! He distributes a few extra tins of condensed milk to the most wretched of the men, gives out a few medicines to the infirmary attendant, who is a leper himself, then goes away.

In a leaky little dugout, Casquette and I left Saint Laurent about noon, and a half hour later we approached the island from the Dutch side of the river.

Three men came to meet us. I am not squeamish, having witnessed plenty of horrors in my life, but they were so repulsive that they turned my stomach.

One had no hands . . . just hanging claws!

Another had his body covered with bandages soiled with yellow pus.

The third one was a specter with no nose, and his mouth was a black hole from which the teeth had disappeared. "Belbenoit!" he croaked.

"Hello!" I answered, trying to put a name to this face that I could not recognize.

"It's Gégène G.!" Casquette whispered.

"You're going to attempt an escape?" the leper asked me. "I heard you were in Panama! What made you go to France?"

"Oh, homesick," I found strength to say. I gave them some cigarettes, then we went to see the boat. Casquette had hidden his big dugout in a little creek.

"It's a good one," said Gégène, "and if you can't make it with that you can't make it at all!"

Another leper arrived. He was the attendant for the infirmary of the island, and the disease had not yet disfigured him much. One enormous ear was the only sign of his malady.

He invited us to have coffee with him. I knew that leprosy could be contracted only by direct contact with blood, and accepted the offer which was without danger. We went past the huts. Most of the roofs were full of holes. A horrible stench hung over the place. Among the seventy-odd men standing around, all the stages of leprosy were represented—faces eaten away, enormous ears, rotted stumps of arms and legs, and so forth. Most of them had strips of old flour sacks instead of bandages around their festering hands and feet. It was frightful to behold!

We entered the infirmary. It was a little larger hut than the others and it was of brick. Hanging up to dry on strings were some strips of bandage, but they had been washed in cold water, and without soap, and one could see the yellow blotches that the pus had left. And to think that they were going to be put on other sick men!

On a shelf were about a dozen half empty bottles. This was all the medicine the infirmary had!

"He sells all the medicines he can get his hands on," said Casquette. "It's his *débrouille!*"

"Well, it isn't very much!" remarked the attendant, good naturedly, "for the doctor sends me practically nothing! It's six months since I've had any disinfectant for the huts. And no tincture of iodine, no capsules of chaulmoogra and no hyrganol. Last month I received four flour sacks in place of bandages and dressings, for there were no more bandages at the hospital. Two months ago I had to put a dressing on the body of a man named Trinquart. As there was no bandage I had to make the dressing out of an old flour sack. He suffered so much that he threw himself into the Maroni during the night. . . .

The leper-attendant made the coffee while he was telling us his troubles. "A few years ago the lepers were better fed. The Administration gave us each a tin of condensed milk a day. But that was stopped under the pretext that we sold the milk to buy tobacco! So now we get the same rations as the camps, plus just a can of

milk each *week*, and a quart of wine on Thursday. When the doctor pays his visit, he hands out an extra tin of milk to the sickest. That's 30 sous for a package of tobacco!"

The coffee was ready. He gave Casquette a glass which he washed, and it served for us both, while the leper-attendant drank from an old milk tin. "We don't even have privies!" he continued. "We have to use the river. And there're no wells . . . no good water . . . we have to drink the brackish water of the river. We have nothing to read . . . nothing to do . . . nothing! They give us just rough rope hammocks to sleep in. And blankets—they don't give us any of them either! All we have for clothes is a shirt, a pair of pants and wooden shoes."

We stood around, gingerly sipping our coffee.

"You knew Barlay, Casquette?" the leper-attendant demanded. "He died just the other day! Poor Barlay. . . . The flesh grubs literally devoured him. They ate right through to his intestines! I had nothing to kill them with, and the poor fellow just rotted away.

"Last year we had a man so badly off he howled with pain every night!" the attendant continued, puffing one of the cigarettes I had given him, with great satisfaction. "The guard was told about it . . . and the doctor too—but what could they do! There is no hospital for us. Old man Bosco who slept in the hut next to the sick man got tired of hearing him howl, and killed him with a blow on the head. . . . Then he threw him in the river.

The next morning when the guard came to bring the rations, Bosco cried out to him:

" 'I threw R. in the Maroni last night!'

" 'Write me a report of how it happened,' the guard shouted back. 'You can give it to me tomorrow morning.'

" 'When you bring me some paper and a pen and ink, I'll write it for you!' Bosco yelled back derisively.

"And that was all!—The following day there was one portion of meat less in the sack of rations. When the doctor came again he didn't give an extra can of milk to Bosco, because he was angry at what he'd done. And that was all there was to it . . . because just as there is no hospital for us, so there isn't any court or any prison, either! We have the right to do as we please until we die!"

"About how many die here in a year?" I asked.

"Well, 23 new ones came over in the last six months, and already ten are dead!" he told me.

As we got back into our dugout, the repulsive Gégène came up to me again and asked me for some more cigarettes. I gave him my package of tobacco, and promised to send him some newspapers by Casquette next day. And we paddled off up-river to Saint Laurent.

"That is dreadful about Gégène!" I said. "I knew him . . . we came in the same cargo from France in 1923, twelve years ago. He was eighteen years old, given life for murder! Before he even got here in Guiana he was

a homosexual, and he got along all right! He always had his strong "friend" to look out for him! He had a pretty easy time—decent clothes, and a package of tobacco always in his pocket. Gégène wasn't much liked, because of his bad temper. And he was too pleased with his own looks—always taking care of his girlish face, his white hands and rosy skin!

"A few months after he got here, he was taken along on an escape by his pervert friend who'd organized the getaway. Gégène caused the failure of the whole thing! He got terribly seasick and begged to be put ashore. His friend, the leader of the *évasion*, consented, and they were all arrested in British Guiana, and sent back. Mad fear of the sea stopped Gégène from trying again!

"Gégène was passed on from one pervert to another. He was played for in card games . . . even sold by a convict who had him as a *môme* and wanted money to escape!

"I hadn't thought of him in several years, until I saw him again in Cayenne in 1930. It was at this time that his disease began to show up! The lobe of his ear began to get large—his eyebrows fell out! He went to see the doctor, fearing he had syphilis, and the doctor discovered the terrible Hansen bacillus of leprosy!

"At first Gégène refused to believe it. He insisted the doctor had made a mistake—even accused him of wanting to separate him from his friend. I remember all the desperate tricks he tried, to keep from going to that cursed island back there! He tried to pay the hospital

attendant to give him another analysis, for which he'd substitute someone else's nasal mucus! But the attendant could do nothing. He then insulted the Commandant of the penitentiary, to get put in a cell as punishment. But lepers can't be condemned even for a crime, as the attendant just told us, for there's no special prison for them! In spite of his great fear of the sea, he then proposed to his *fort-à-bras* protector to organize an escape. But before the attempt was ready Gégène was sent to the leper island. His lover at Cayenne forgot him!"

"Well, I suppose Gégène found himself a new pervert among the lepers!" Casquette remarked.

"Yes—but I guess the punishment was pretty terrible, for a man like him! He'd always been so proud of his good looks—and now you can't even recognize him!"

Gégène had no doubt contracted the terrible disease at Camp Acarouany, where he had been sent when he first arrived in Guiana. In this camp are kept the civilians of the Colony attacked by leprosy; here about twenty convicts are forced to work, and frequently they have relations with the young women in the camp who are still in the first stages of leprosy.

"You remember the Constant affair, don't you?" Casquette remarked, as we paddled back to Saint Laurent.

"I've heard something about it!" I replied.

"Well, Constant was one of my friends," said Casquette. "I knew him back in Paris before he was sentenced. And I can tell you the story from personal knowledge, for I was in Saint Laurent when it hap-

pened! Constant was condemned to twelve years of hard labor for theft. His wife was the cause of his arrest, and she was condemned to five years in France. When she finished her term, she began writing to him! Constant had caught leprosy working at that filthy Camp Acarouany—just like Gégène! And he was sent to Saint Louis. In his heart he had never forgiven his wife for denouncing him to the police. And he planned a terrible vengeance! He wrote his wife that he could easily escape if she could get together some money and meet him in Dutch Guiana. Then they'd go to the United States together, and make a lot of money!

"She worked hard and saved the money for the escape and for her passage. And then, following the instructions Constant gave her, she took passage to Dutch Guiana. When she got to Albina, she took lodging at the house of a negro and immediately wrote a letter to her husband. She sent the letter by a *libéré*.

"One night each week Constant went down to Saint Laurent in a boat to get his mail, and when he found out his wife had arrived, he sent her a letter by a *libéré* telling her to meet him as soon as it was dark, in a small plantation a hundred yards or so from the Dutch village.

"Night came. Constant left the leper island in his dugout and went to his terrible rendezvous! He'd never told his wife about his leprosy! His nose was completely eaten away! And he was so frightful to look at that he covered his face with a rag.

"When he arrived at the meeting place, his wife was

waiting. She called to him and he answered. The night was very dark. She recognized his voice and together they went to a little cabin which was in the middle of the plantation.

"They passed the night together there in the black darkness. When dawn broke and she caught sight of his face, she uttered a scream of terror and tried to run away—but he held her fiercely and shouted his hate in her face.

"Then, mad with fury, he cursed her and bit her all over the body till the blood spurted, making dead sure that she would be infected, too.

"Her terrified screams were finally heard by the Dutch police!" Casquette continued. "They ran up and overpowered Constant and he was sent back to Saint Louis in irons, where he died a few weeks later. As for his wife—she went insane and they sent her to Paramaribo. I don't know what ever became of her!

"And it was as a result of that affair," he wound up, "that the order was given to the police and guards to fire on all lepers at sight if they are seen in Saint Laurent!

"But that doesn't stop them going there after dark," he commented cynically.

We were nearing the shoddy huts of the *libéré* village along the water front of Saint Laurent.

"The only leper I've ever heard about who was glad to be one is Gerardin!" I said to Casquette. "Remem-

ber him! He did ten years here in the Colony, and then he escaped from the leper island back there and got to Brazil!"

"To Brazil!" Casquette exclaimed.

"Yes! I heard about him when I was in Panama. Funny story, his! Gerardin was shackled to an *inco* who became a leper in Camp Charvein. . . ."

"Was *he* an incorrigible?" Casquette demanded.

"Sure. And his chain-mate's leprosy gave him his one chance to get out of the incorrigibles' camp!

"Gerardin, who'd been shackled to him for a year, feigned leprosy. He pretended numbness in his legs. No other convict would let himself be chained to him. And even the guards kept their distance! He cut off fingers and an ear—and he spread the juice of some herb that stops bleeding on the cuts. He made himself look as though he had the leprosy, all right! And pretty soon he got himself put on Saint Louis. The lepers greeted him like a brother. They showed him a hidden dugout in which they crossed the river at night to steal in Saint Laurent and buy rum from the Chinamen.

" 'Any evening you want to go,' they told him!

"Gerardin went that very night. He got some food in Saint Laurent and went out to sea with the tide. Ten days and nights he was alone on the sea. But there was no storm, happily for him! And he made Para.

"He did a little of everything for a living, while he passed through the coast towns of Brazil. His most suc-

cessful trade was playing dentist in the little towns. He was strong enough to pull out a tooth, and that's all he knew about it. But he made a good living!

"Finally he reached Rio and then went on to Sao Paulo. One day he noticed that a tattoo mark on his arm had swollen a little and the blue ink had turned violet. He stuck a needle in it and there was no pain! He got in a panic! Gerardin went to the Prevention Bureau and had himself examined. He didn't think he really had leprosy, but he just had to make sure for his peace of mind!

"It was leprosy all right! They saw he had no papers and his tattoo markings aroused suspicions. Then they discovered he spoke French. The French Consul found out he was from Guiana!

"But they couldn't extradite him! No ship would take him on board! So he couldn't be sent back here to the Colony, and no prison in Brazil would accept him either. So they had to build him a prison all his own in the leper colony at Piratipingui. There, in his own prison, he has a garden and grows fruit and raises his own pigs and chickens! His house is airy, and he keeps it spotlessly clean. The disease has attacked him in a mild form, and so he's happy there, with all his needs provided for. Around his house and garden there's a double protection of heavy barbed wire and there are bars in his windows—to make it look like a jail! But Gerardin doesn't mind that. He knows he'll never be sent back here to Guiana!"

Chapter XVII

Valcada, a Tragedy of Escape

THERE was great excitement in Saint Laurent. A *libéré* named Valcada was to come up before the T.M.S. on a charge so cruel that even the most wretched *libérés* in the Colony were sorry for him, and were wondering just how much the T.M.S. would punish him. Many of us went to see his trial.

Valcada, too, was a victim of *doublage*—the most odious and unjust penal regulation enforced anywhere in the world today. The hideous law of *doublage* forces every convict with more than an eight-year sentence to stay in Guiana as a life exile. And even a minimum sentence of from five to eight years means double that time in the grim Penal Colony!

Valcada had been sent to Guiana for five years at hard labor, and when those five years were almost finished, and he was to become a *libéré* in the Colony a friend of his suddenly offered him a chance to escape.

"We leave tomorrow night!" Gandon had said. "We're just four in the dugout—she's a good one, and we've got lots of supplies! One of the men is a fine sailor! There's a place for *you!*"

Valcada told him he'd give him his answer next day.

That night he was unable to sleep. What should he do? In seventy-two hours he'd be freed. But that was a mere irony! He'd have paid his debt to society. Yes—he'd have finished his five-year sentence! But then would come *doublage*, another five years when he'd be shackled to that wretched Penal Colony. He'd been sentenced for five years, but he'd really have to do ten!

Five years more! That was an eternity—the chances were a hundred to one he'd die of hunger, and even if he did live he'd never be able to earn the money for his passage back home!

Five long years had passed since that day when the police in Paris arrested him. He was out of work, his two small children crying for food. Desperate, he had stolen a little food. It was his first offense! And they had branded him a convict! The tears ran down his lean cheeks as he remembered his wife's last kiss . . . how she'd said "Courage!" when he saw her for the last time, just before they put him on the convict ship.

Then, there in the Penal Settlement, his first escape through the jungle which had lasted but a few days! Half dead from fever and hunger, he had come back and given himself up of his own accord. And the Administration laughed at his folly.

He thought of the last letters of his wife: "A few months and we shall be together again . . . We can begin a new life . . . the children are getting quite big. . . ." Poor woman. She knew nothing of the debt of five more years in Guiana which he owed the Law—*Doublage!*

So now, next morning Valcada gave his answer to his friend Gandon: "Tonight, I go with you!"

The escape had been carefully organized. Gandon, ex-officer of the French Army, given a life sentence for making counterfeit money, was a serious-minded fellow. He had attended to all details of the venture with military precision. He'd spent several years getting ready for this escape, the only one he intended to try.

That night the five companions slipped out of their barrack in one of the jungle camps, and felt their way cautiously along dark trails to the shallow creek where they had hidden the dugout. Nothing was lacking—there was even a compass, a map too! Also, this was December, one of the calmest months for venturing on the sea.

They got into the dugout. Each of them took a paddle, and silently they nosed out into the Maroni River. A few hours later they were on the sea, and by daylight, they were far out from land—far from prison and all that went with it.

For days they sailed towards the west. The weather was perfect, with a steady wind. Valcada was glad now that he'd come. He reasoned that he would not need to take the risk of going back to France—that he could live abroad just as well. Besides, he wasn't French—he was Italian, and could go back to Italy! *There* they wouldn't bother him! Or, better still, he could send for his wife and go to the United States. He was a skilled workman, courageous—why couldn't he earn himself a living!

A line of mountains showed faint against the sky—Trinidad! So they changed their course to point due south. Next day, just as it was beginning to get dark on the sea, they raised the coast of Venezuela. An enormous black hole in the coast line told them they were off the mouth of the great Orinoco River.

"Tomorrow, we're free men!" Gandon cried.

But with nightfall a wind sprang up. The sky became overcast. Rolling gray clouds hid the stars, and the waves foamed into flying whitecaps. They were holding the dugout under sail, trying to make land before the storm broke. Suddenly a violent gust of wind took the sail hard over. They all threw their weight on the opposite side of the dugout to right it. But too late! A huge wave, surging out of the night, caught the craft off balance, and swamped it with a crash.

Cries pierced the night, as each man struggled frantically to save himself! The wave passed. They were only *four* clinging to the slimy hull of the upturned dugout. One of them had gone down like a stone.

"Tear the sail loose and right her!" Gandon shouted. They worked frantically, but it was no use. The waves made the hull rock and roll and pitch unceasingly in the big troughs. The long, heavy dugout was too much for their strength. And every few minutes the four shipwrecked fugitives would be torn loose, and then grab for the slippery edge of the hull again.

They no longer tried to talk—just waited with desperate impatience for daylight, so that they could see

how far from land they were. All of a sudden Gandon called out to Valcada, "Where's Roger?"

Valcada looked around but could see him nowhere! Roger must have come to the end of his strength, let go and sunk without a sound.

Day came and the sea went down. Only three now, clutching the slimy side of the dugout! No land in sight! The storm had carried them out to sea again. Again they tried vainly to right that dugout! They only wasted their waning strength in desperate effort, even though the drifting of the dugout before the wind had torn away mast and sail.

Balancing themselves on the upturned hull, they searched the horizon for a ship. Meanwhile the sun climbed high—hunger and thirst tormented them! And so the day dragged slowly into night again. Once more the wind roughened the sea into mountains, and they had to drop back into the water and hang to the edge of the dugout.

All night they hung there grimly. The effort of continually catching a new hold on the plunging hull as it rolled on itself was fast wearing them out.

"We won't last much longer like this," Gandon gasped through chattering teeth.

As the night wore on the wind stiffened, the sea became heavier, and the dugout pitched even more dangerously. Valcada asked himself, "Can I last till daylight?" He looked wildly out to sea in the darkness, searching for the lights of some passing ship.

Suddenly in the blackness Maurice shouted hoarsely, "Land!"

"Where?" Gandon shouted back.

"Land—it's land! I can touch bottom! We can walk ashore!"

"He's talking bosh!" Valcada cried to Gandon, as Maurice shrieked again in the darkness.

"Sharks!" he screamed. "Down there—trying to bite my feet!"

"He's stark mad!" Gandon yelled, then he called to him, "Maurice! Maurice!"

"I can feel the bottom! I'm going ashore!" Maurice cried wildly. "I don't want to stay here any longer—too many sharks!" Then another piercing cry! And silence.

Now on the second day there were only *two* of them on the hull. They looked about them over the horizon, but everywhere was only the empty, wide sea. Too weak to talk, they could only look at each other with swollen, salt-reddened eyes.

The scorching hours of the day were a long torture. They were maddened by thirst! In the late afternoon Gandon whispered hoarsely to Valcada, "I'm done for! If there's no ship tonight, I'll let go!"

"Courage!" Valcada mumbled feebly. The sun went down behind black clouds and the wind began to stiffen. In the dusk, Valcada tried to keep from thinking about the terrible long hours of darkness which were about to start again. It would be his last night, for he, too, was

on the point of giving out. He tried not to think. He must not think!

Suddenly Gandon cried hoarsely through his cracked and swollen lips, "I'm going to swim ashore!" And he let go of the dugout and started swimming feebly—swimming out to sea, away from shore.

"Come back! You're mad!" Valcada croaked, but Gandon made no answer and continued to swim straight ahead.

The third night came now and Valcada was alone, clinging numbly to the dugout, letting go of it and catching it again as it rose and sank on the long waves, hardly knowing why he continued the blank struggle for life. There weren't any more *hours* for him—he didn't care if it was day or night—he was in a sort of heavy dream and even his thirst ceased to torture him. He was just waiting for the end.

And when daylight came again, he went on gazing weakly ahead toward the horizon at water, gray empty water everywhere. A large wave washed over him, and choking, he turned and lifted his head for air.

Was he dreaming? Mad maybe! Land was there—straight in front of him! *Land so close he saw palm trees standing on a white beach!* Mumbling to himself, he looked again—yes, this was *land!* It was too real to be a vision! He had been looking straight in front of him, out to sea, until the wave made him turn his head . . . too hopeless and far gone to ever think of looking behind him.

Slowly the tide took him nearer shore. Then, with the final bit of strength he could muster, too impatient to wait any longer, he let go of the dugout, swam weakly toward the beach. And when his dragging feet touched bottom, he stumbled forward through the shallow water, wild-eyed, a scrambling idiot, and collapsed on the dry sand.

When Valcada came to his senses, he was lying in a boat! Two husky blue-black negroes were sitting looking at him, a third held the tiller. They spoke to him but he couldn't understand what they were saying. One of them handed him a gourd filled with coconut milk which he gulped down savagely, then they fed him pieces of casava. The three black fishermen had seen his lifeless form stretched on the beach, and had picked him up. In the boat were hundreds of fish. Night was falling —they had been traveling all day, while he slept from exhaustion.

One of the fishermen pointed to some huts in the distance. They were heading toward a village. Where was he? Valcada asked himself. Where were they taking him?

They arrived at the village at dusk. But no sooner had they touched shore than he saw some big blacks in uniform. Valcada was so completely done in that for many days he wasn't able to realize the extent of his tragic luck. He had won through, had weathered the storm, to land in Venezuelan territory, where at that time he would not have been arrested. But chance willed that

these black fishermen from British Guiana had seen him lying on the beach, and had picked him up and brought him back to their Colony. And one hour later he was put behind prison bars!

In a very few days, without waiting for him to recover, they carried him to Georgetown. There, in the prison of the Colony's capital, he was put with several other *évadés* who were also under arrest. They were all sent to Saint Laurent by the first boat, and were immediately locked up in the Blockhouses.

Forty-eight hours later Valcado became a *libéré*, having now served the two days which still remained of his sentence, though he still had to reckon with the punishment for his escape. Before his trial on this new charge, the guard who distributed the mail threw him a letter. A man sitting near Valcada picked it up and gave it to him. It was from his wife! On the envelope, in large blue letters, was written "Call at the Post Office for 500 francs." This letter had arrived in Guiana before he had tried to escape—but he was at that time a convict and couldn't receive mail.

Valcada unfolded the letter with trembling hands, and read it through tear-dimmed eyes. "I'm sending you my savings," it had said, "so that you can buy some clothes for your return. I'll watch for you on every boat from America, darling." Poor woman! Nothing is ever said in the French courts about *doublage*—they had convicted her husband for *five* years, and now those long years were up. But she didn't know he would have to

serve five long years more as a *libéré*. Even the convicts themselves, when they are sentenced in France, have no idea that their term is really double. They are told this officially only on the day they are freed from jail in Saint Laurent!

To Valcada, weakened as he was by his terrible ordeal on the sea, this letter was a last blow. It broke him.

A few days later he was taken to hospital, and was taken from there on a stretcher to appear before the T.M.S. who sentenced him to two years hard labor for his attempt to escape.

He gave a grim smile when he heard the sentence; was taken back to hospital, and died there five days later.

Chapter XVIII

Thirty-two Years at Hard Labor—for What?—Legay's Fiasco

ANOTHER *libéré*, Charlot Pain, who was convicted along with Valcada that same day by the T.M.S. to an additional sentence of two and a half years hard labor, is another helpless victim of *doublage*.

His story is so fantastic, so unbelievable that I have gone to much trouble and expense to verify his record. Charlot Pain is in Guiana today, after more than thirty years as a convict. But if French Justice were to be asked for what crime this man was sent to Guiana, it would not be able to answer. His slate is absolutely clean. For, in 1925 his offense was amnestied in France. And by French law an amnesty automatically annuls the offense. In Guiana I have known some hardy, wretched men who had come there sentenced to five years, but had been there as convicts more than twenty years . . . and still had more than twenty years yet ahead of them. But Pain's life has been even more wretched than any of those!

In 1907 Pain was a soldier, serving in one of the African disciplinary battalions, sent there for some small offense. One day at noon, he went slightly out of his

head from sunstroke, a thing which often happens to soldiers under the hot African sun, and set fire to his tent. The War Council at Tunis condemned him to six years of hard labor for "willful destruction of equipment belonging to the Army." On his prison record, I found the following statement: "Value of tent destroyed by the soldier Charlot Pain—27.90 francs [about $5.00]."

Pain arrived in Guiana in the first month of 1908. He served his sentence uneventfully to become a *libéré* in 1913, when, naturally, he would have to do six years of enforced exile in the Penal Colony before he could return to France. This man who had been willing to serve his severe sentence for burning a tent worth only $5.00, realized now that his only salvation lay in escaping, seeing no other alternative than doing that or starving to death as a *libéré* in that hopeless Colony.

Any other civilized nation would have given him his full civil rights and allowed him to go home, but the French penal system plays with its victims like a cat with a mouse. Pain decided to conquer his own liberty.

His first attempt to escape was short-lived. The frail dugout in which he had set out with six other equally wretched *libérés* was wrecked at the tide-swept mouth of the Maroni River. Three of his companions lost their lives! Pain was now sentenced by the T.M.S. to one year of hard labor and he donned again the red and white stripes of a convict.

In 1916, he was freed for the second time. The prob-

lem of existence for the *libérés* being no different from what it had been at his first liberation, he attempted once more to escape; and this time he was caught on the coast of British Guiana.

He was returned by the British authorities and sentenced again by the T.M.S. for a second additional year at hard labor. This time the Administration isolated Pain on the Islands, where most of the year he was in the dark cell-blocks of St. Joseph in solitary confinement.

When at the end of the twelve months of that sentence, he became a *libéré* for the *third* time, he escaped again. This time he was more fortunate and reached Venezuela, where he got an honest job.

The years passed. And when the Armistice was declared at the end of the World War, Pain read in the French newspapers that all strictly military crimes had been amnestied. Pain was overjoyed! His misdemeanor had been forgiven!

He boarded a ship and went to France. Alas, the ship stopped at Martinique! The police asked to see his papers. He hadn't any! He explained his situation to the authorities—but the police put him on a boat going to Saint Laurent, where he was immediately thrown into a cell and once more brought up on charges of having escaped.

The Director of the Administration informed him: "Your original crime is amnestied, true enough. But you escaped from exile before that amnesty was declared. And that's another crime!"

The T.M.S. sentenced Pain to another year at hard labor. Again he was sent to the Islands, and in 1926 he became a *libéré* for the *fourth* time.

For eighteen years now he had led the life of a damned soul! Pain didn't know just how long he would be forced to remain in the Penal Colony as an exile this time. And of course he knew that even if he did see his exile through to the end, he would never have in his pocket enough money to buy passage across the Atlantic back home.

He fled the Colony again. He knew the course to sail . . . he knew all the perils of escape by sea . . . he had carefully organized all the details . . . and he took the dugout and his comrades safely to Venezuela. But there the policy toward *évadés* had changed. They fell into the hands of Gomez's police, and the Iron President put them all to work on the National Highway he was building between Ciudad Bolivar and Caracas.

For an entire year Pain labored like a slave under despotic guards of President Gomez, plying pick and shovel with a hundred other *évadés*. Miserably fed, his feet chained, lashed by the guards who sometimes shot prisoners for sport, Pain was forced to endure an existence perhaps worse than he had known in French Guiana! He was victim of the stigma an escaped convict carries, although legally he was a free man. When the highway was finally finished, he and his fellow fugitives were shipped back to Guiana!

Pain was again sentenced by the T.M.S.—this time for

two years at hard labor. The Islands again, solitary confinement again, and finally he was freed for the *fifth* time!

In 1931, Pain was still alive and enduring his ill fortune in the Colony. The lot of the *libéré* was no better than it had ever been. It was even worse, if possible, so he began to plan yet another escape.

Then, for once, luck seemed to be on his side! One afternoon as he wandered down the muddy streets of Saint Laurent, looking for some little thing to do to earn a few cents with which to buy something to eat, he was stopped by a stranger—a young woman who approached him timidly.

"Monsieur Pain?"

Pain was so startled at being addressed as *mister*, after so many years, that he stared at her speechless. This one little word of respect brought tears to his eyes.

"Yes, Madame!" he stammered out.

"Come!" she said breathlessly. She led Pain hastily along the narrow streets and turned a deserted corner. She took him quickly up a shaky stairway to her room, and locked the door.

The rays of the late afternoon sun were slanting into the bare room. Pain was startled out of his wits when suddenly a little girl dashed across the room and calling out, joyously, "*Mon papa!*" grabbed him about the knees and nearly tipped him over.

"Hush, *chérie!* This is not Papa," the mother nervously caught her up. She turned to Pain who stood un-

easily by the door. "Monsieur Pain, will you help me save my husband! I'll give you money—all I have!"

With astonished eyes, Pain asked her, "Your husband? Who is he?"

"George Legay! In the penitentiary here in Saint Laurent! I've come here—all the way from Paris to help him escape—" she exclaimed. "My husband told me about you. You've escaped many times and you know the sea! He told me to find you, and that I could trust you to help him. I have the money to pay for everything," she ended breathlessly.

"Money!" It was his dream come true—"You have money for an escape?" She nodded. "I could have things ready in just a few days!" he told her excitedly.

"Wonderful!" she breathed. And she took a tight roll of bills out of a hidden pocket of her skirt. "Here is the money to buy the things for the escape!"

Pain took it. "Don't mention our plans to a soul," he warned. "As soon as I have everything ready I'll come here again. Tell Legay not to worry!"

Out in the streets again, Pain made his hungry way to one of the shoddy restaurants on the town square and bought himself the first real meal he had eaten since he could remember. Then he bought himself a bottle of the cheap tafia rum which is made in the Colony, and went off to his thatched hut in the *libéré* village down by the water front, to make his plans.

In a few days, he'd picked three companions and procured a sturdy dugout and all the provisions necessary

for the long and dangerous sea venture. Then he went to Madame Legay's room. "Everything's ready!" he told her. "You can tell your husband that we'll start tomorrow night. We'll make straight for Trinidad—and you can meet us there!"

"But little Mireille and I—we're going too!" she said.

Pain was stupefied. "You? . . . And the little one?"

"Of course! My husband wanted me to go by ship to Trinidad and meet him there, but I couldn't stand that. I am his wife, and where he goes, I go!" she exclaimed.

Pain pleaded with her that the little one could never stand the trip, but she was determined. "Yes," she insisted. "Legay and I will look after her well, and she'll be able to stand the trip all right!" Pain had seen so much in his twenty-five years in the Hell that he finally shrugged his shoulders and gave in to her.

"It will take at least another hundred francs, for extra blankets and a dozen tins of condensed milk for the little girl!" he said. Without a word she took the same thin roll of bills from her skirt and handed him another 100-franc note.

The next night, May 22nd, 1932, as soon as it was dark Legay took his wife and little Mireille to the spot where Pain was waiting for them on the deserted bank of the Maroni River, and they were soon on their way.

At nine-thirty that night the guard on duty at the penitentiary, seeing that Legay had not reported, sent one of the Arab turnkeys to look for him. After a few minutes, the turnkey came back to say he had not been

able to find Legay. And the guard, becoming suspicious, informed the Commandant.

An hour later the alarm sounded for Legay's escape! A double-crossing *libéré* said that he had seen Pain carrying Madame Legay's suitcase to the river that afternoon. The Administration's speedboat set off down river at full speed with four guards and a group of turnkeys armed with rifles. All night the speedboat patrolled the long river, playing its powerful searchlights over the banks. By sunrise they were ready to turn back, without having found any trace of the fugitives.

"They must have already reached the sea!" the guards decided, and the speedboat turned back, slowly skirting the jungle-clad bank. Suddenly one of the guards exclaimed, "Listen!"

A child's plaintive crying reached their ears. It was poor little Mireille, crying because of the clouds of mosquitoes devouring her little hands and face. Revolver in hand, the guards leaped onto the bank of the river and raced toward the sound. Pain and one of his friends had time to flee, but the turnkeys caught the other two *libérés*. Legay stayed with his wife, who threw herself at the feet of the guards and begged them to let them get away. But the chief guard told her curtly that they ought to be glad he had rescued them from the wretches they were with, who would have surely murdered them for their money.

The speedboat took them back to Saint Laurent,

where Legay and his companions were immediately thrown into the Blockhouses.

Next morning the Director of the Administration called Madame Legay to his office. "Because your husband was absent less than twelve hours, Madame, under the regulations he is not considered guilty of escape," he said. "So, I'm not going to sentence your husband for his attempt. He will be punished with thirty days of cell instead. But you must go away. If you don't, I shall be obliged to send your husband to the Islands for several years! His fate is in your hands—You must decide."

"I'll go, Director," she said, with death in her soul.

Before she left, they allowed her a few minutes in which to say good-by to her husband. She knew she would never see him again!

Pain gave himself up, but he was not punished, since Legay, who was considered the leader of the escape, hadn't been punished. Pain told me that, of course, he never had any intention of murdering Legay or his wife or their little girl. I learned, furthermore, that next day, when Madame Legay got back her suitcase which she had left in the speedboat, she found that it had been opened. The lock had been broken and everything of any value, including a few pieces of cheap jewelry, had been taken—obviously by one of the guards.

Undaunted by this failure, Pain tried again to escape. He dared the sea for the sixth time and finally reached Colombia. Once more bad luck dogged him, for that Republic, too, had just begun taking stringent

measures to arrest fugitives from Guiana. And once more he was sent back! This time the T.M.S., in January, 1934, sentenced him to two and a half years of hard labor.

For the *seventh* time, on June 8th, 1937, Charlot Pain became a *libéré!*

Thirty-two years had passed since the day when the War Council at Tunis sentenced him to six years of hard labor for setting fire to a $5.00 tent! Fifteen years had passed since the amnesty which had canceled the misdemeanor which had sent him to the Islands. And Charlot Pain is still dragging out his years in exile!

He is not a thief. He is not a murderer. Society cannot accuse him of a single infraction of its laws. He had just, in a moment of sunstroke, set fire to an army tent, worth the miserable sum of $5.00!

Instead of sending him to a hospital, they sent him to his doom in the foul Colony of Guiana! He will certainly die there, for each time he has tried to pull himself out of that mire, has risked his life to live where he could make an honest living, they have dragged him back still deeper—until they have broken his life and robbed him of all usefulness. This is French Justice! . . . This is the Devil's Island system—a thing to make any Frenchman blush with shame!

Chapter XIX

The Story of "Dadar" Durand—Butterfly Hunting in the Jungle

FOR Christmas in 1938, I sent one of the comrades of my final escape a ticket for his passage back to France . . . Edward Durand, nicknamed Dadar. It is due in great part to his help and unselfishness that I'm here today, able to write about these things.

I didn't pick Dadar for my friend because of his record. In the Colony, when you make friends with a man or trust him, which is rare, you don't think anything about what crime it was that sent him to Guiana. It is certainly true that at Devil's Island there *are* criminals who have no right to much human pity. But there are hundreds like Dadar—condemned for the best years of their lives to hard labor in the horrors of Guiana, who, if they had been in the United States for instance, would have been sent to prison for only a few months.

It was not until the end of October, 1934, when I was on the Islands, that I knew Dadar. Since I was soon going to be sent to Saint Laurent to become a *libéré* after my three-year sentence to hard labor, the Commandant put me in the gang of convalescent men of whom Dadar was one.

Six of us convicts were assigned to pulling weeds in the upper plateau of Royal Island. The gang consisted of the lifer, Guy Davin, who had killed the notorious American gangster, Richard Wall, in Paris; a German who had been sentenced to ten years of hard labor for stealing the priceless "Grand Condé"—rose diamond—from the Chateau of Chantilly near Paris; a Chinaman who had been a murderous pirate in the outskirts of Tonkin; an Arab—and Dadar and myself.

Having been a playboy and ace flyer in France, Guy Davin dreamed only of planes, and discussed motors with the German, who had been a mechanic. The Chinaman complained without ceasing of the doctor, who on each visit gave him four more days of light-duty instead of putting him in the hospital. The Arab jabbered in his own jargon with the Arab turnkey who had charge of our gang, while Dadar and I talked of Panama.

Dadar's father had been killed fighting in the front trenches in 1914. If that soldier who gave his life for the glory of his country could see what the nation has done to his son, he would curse it from the bottom of his grave!

Dadar's mother was left a destitute widow with five small children. Dadar, who was three years old, and his two brothers were put in a government school for children of soldiers killed in the war. Dadar hated the school! And when he was twelve he ran away, stole a bicycle, and made his way back to the village where his

mother lived with his two sisters. He was arrested and sent to a reformatory—where he was confined until he was seventeen years old.

I have never heard tell of a reformatory that helped improve a boy. On the contrary, the greater part of the convicts at Devil's Island have spent their youth in these schools! Dadar was no exception. At the age of seventeen, exactly 14 days after he was let out of the reformatory, he committed a "crime" for which he was sent to Guiana for five years at hard labor!

Crime is indeed a broad word! With three other boys even younger than himself, Dadar entered a house when the occupants were away. It chanced that the four boys found a little fortune of gold coins! This gold belonged to an unpatriotic Frenchman who had hoarded it against the orders of the government, instead of having it changed into paper money during the war.

None of the boys had ever seen gold pieces before. They joyfully filled their pockets and started out for the nearest village. The first thing that caught their eye was a street vendor from whom they eagerly bought all the ice cream cones they could carry, paying him generously with a gold piece and telling him to keep the change! The vendor was either an honest man, or perhaps he was afraid of being found in possession of a gold coin. He hurried to the police station and handed in the gold piece. An hour later the boys were arrested and had tearfully owned up to the theft.

Dadar being the oldest of the four, and already hav-

ing a reformatory record, was listed as a "dangerous and habitual criminal." He was given five years at hard labor! His three comrades were sent to a reformatory, and it is probably only a matter of time before they will land in Devil's Island too! Anything else would be astonishing!

So when he was only seventeen and a half, Dadar was put on the filthy convict ship *La Martinière*, in the company of assassins, housebreakers, perverts and criminals of all kinds! It's easy to imagine what happens to a mere child thrown in with these hardened criminals who can do anything on earth as long as it doesn't bother the guards. Young Dadar arrived in Guiana as the wretched *môme* of an older convict.

A few weeks later, this convict insisted on taking him with him on an attempt at escape which ended in shipwreck, causing the death of three of the group, and the return of the four others of whom Dadar was one. The T.M.S. realized that Dadar had been taken along because of his youth, which often happens, and so he was not punished. But he was sent to the Islands for the rest of his term. That produced a great physical transformation in him. In less than a year the immature youth became a strong man, capable of holding his own with any convict and firmly commanding respect! And he was respected! He had numbers of admirers, for he was good-looking. Many of the old convicts gave him tobacco, plied him with glasses of coffee in hopes of es-

tablishing relations with him. He accepted everything he could get without giving them anything in return.

Having been confined in Reformatories since the age of twelve, Dadar knew nothing of ordinary life. His constant dream was of sticking up a bank, revolver in hand; or else he talked for hours about women and was certain his good looks would land him one with plenty of money.

He loved exciting stories! And as I had plenty, I told him the stories of the big shots in crime who had passed through the prison during the last thirty years.

Dadar was to be freed one week after myself. As the prison-boat stops by the Islands only every fortnight, we would leave on the same boat. He was, in spite of his youth, a real comrade, and we had become good chums. Very often when I had nothing to smoke he would give me some of his tobacco. He did everything he could to help me. I often needed paper to write down notes, and he found means of getting it for me.

I promised to help him when he became a *libéré*. It was his greatest anxiety. For he knew nothing about living on his own, and he was going to become a *libéré* without any money. And in Saint Laurent there are six hundred freed convicts more than half of whom are without a place to sleep! They lie in the streets at night. Perhaps a hundred of these *libérés* have jobs—at a wage of 15 francs (45 cents) a day. A bare handful of others have a chance of two or three days work each month, when a cargo ship arrives. A few more are able to do a

little smuggling from Albina where they can get Japanese silk articles very cheap for the wives of the guards. Many of the *libérés* steal freely, even impudently. If they aren't caught in the act, what they get is all theirs, and if they do get caught . . . they'll at least have some food while they're in prison! This desperate existence of a *libéré* lasts up to the last day . . . when an access of fever more violent than the others takes him away!

The day we crossed to the mainland was clear and hot. Dadar was excited as we were marched into the main office of the Saint Laurent penitentiary to be released from the convict roll. We gladly took off our worn red and white striped convict clothes, and were doled out the ill-fitting, coarse dark blue trousers and coats which the Administration provides for each *libéré* the day he is released.

I was before Dadar in line, and I waited outside the big iron gate for him to join me.

"Well, now we're free!" Dadar exclaimed cynically. "What do we do next?" he said uneasily.

"First, we've got to find a place to sleep," I told him, and we started off toward the *libéré* village down on the river front.

All around us the fiery sun beat down on the smelly streets of Saint Laurent. Flies buzzed about the offal lying on the ground and along the walls of dirty, unpainted houses. A half-clothed wretch was sleeping in the gutter, his drunken face partly covered with a piece of filthy newspaper.

Ragged *libérés* with sunken cheeks followed us with listless eyes, from where they lolled in the scant shade of a Chinaman's rum shop. A lifeless stupor hung over the whole place. A village of crime!

There wasn't even a dog about, for these are pounced upon by starved *libérés* for whom they make a good feast. And this was the only spot in the whole world where we were allowed to live! Except like wild animals in the steaming jungle!

Soon we were in the even more miserable *libéré* village along the bank of the dirty Maroni River. The shacks were thatched with palm leaves, and their walls were mud and sticks, patched up with odds and ends of weather beaten boards. Weed-choked alleys separated the huts. As a Governor of the Colony has said, "It is when freedom is gained that the sentence begins."

Dadar was depressed. "How can we ever get enough money in this place to escape?" he said dismally.

"Butterflies!" I answered, reassuringly, and pointed to the towering dark jungle. All this was an old story to me. But I looked longingly at the river. It led to the sea, wide, treacherous and monotonous—but our one hope of escaping this rotting death.

Next day Dadar and I moved into a shack which a *libéré* who was about to escape sold to me for a few francs.

We were in a bad season of the year to try to escape —too many storms out at sea! I decided to wait until the season of calm weather in April. But in the inter-

vening months I had to eat. And Dadar, too! I had a little money—a 1,000 francs waiting for me at the Saint Laurent Post Office sent to me by my lawyer, Maître Rouvières, in Paris. But this I wanted to save for my escape.

There were the butterflies—the brilliant blue Morphos and other butterflies that abound in the Guiana jungles. It was tiresome work, but Dadar and I together could catch enough of them to support ourselves. We would arrange them with bright colored beetles and strangely shaped insects in shallow boxes made from the tropical hardwoods. I could also sell on commission butterflies caught by the convicts. I knew the chef on the *Biskra.* We were good friends, and he would take my butterflies and souvenirs to the tourist shops in Martinique.

In the ruined Colony of Guiana, men with pale faces and bodies wracked with malaria hunt butterflies grimly for a living. There in that rain-soaked jungle which the condemned curse, God has put a brilliant thing, resplendent and fragile, to help miserable men conquer their freedom. No woman in the civilized world wearing her butterfly brooch or setting bonbons on her butterfly tray, no collector bartering at a shop for a South American specimen, could know the hunger and suffering of the bearded human derelicts who captured the glittering insects. And these gorgeous butterflies, the only thing of beauty in that infernal Colony, wretched

men must destroy to have some food and money to hoard for escape from death.

Every morning, before the sun was up, Dadar and I went off into the jungle with our home-made nets under our arms.

Our first prize was the big eight-inch Caligo Brasiliensis, which flies rapidly in the clearings in the half hour after dawn and again for half an hour at dusk. Two big white circles on its velvety wings make it look like a curious owl's head, and frightens off attacking birds. And when the hot rays of the sun came filtering through the mantle of green foliage over our heads, the small transparent-winged Heliconus would begin to fly—their faint spots of red, green, yellow and violet on a velvety black background making them look ghost-like as they flit languidly through the dew-soaked undergrowth under the tall, dripping trees. As they bring no price in the market, the hunters leave them severely alone.

Then, at nine o'clock almost on the dot, the gleaming blue Morphos appeared, flying rapidly, nervously, in spasmodic dashes along any trail or track they could find. The king of butterflies, always blue, and every shade of blue and hard to catch! These bring 6 francs each, and in Guiana the condemned hunt them systematically. Dadar and I cut several trails with our machete which all met in a small clearing where we waited with our nets. Apparently anything blue attracts the big butterflies. So one of us would wave a piece of blue paper

attached to a stick—or, better still, a dead Morpho stuck on a piece of board. They came dipping around it! With a deft swoop of the net we'd capture them! After an hour and a half the Morphos disappeared. They wouldn't fly again until the same time next morning, and then only if the sun shone brightly.

As the day got hot, we hunted a rarer species—the Rathenor. This butterfly is smaller and even a more brilliant blue than the Morpho. Its blue is a pale, metallic color, and the under side of the wings looks like marble. This rare butterfly never comes down to the ground but flies at a height of from 10 to 15 feet. So, to catch it, we built pole scaffolds at the edge of the clearing. From these "look-outs" we would scoop at the Rathenors when they flashed by!

The rare female of this species, the most fairy-like and delicate of all tropical butterflies, was worth 40 francs, the equivalent of $1.50! A veritable fortune to us! The males were worth 10 francs. However, every butterfly had to be perfect—the slightest piece torn out of the frail wings, or a tiny scratch, made it worthless.

By noon all the butterflies which had the best value stop flying, so we would take the trail back to the *libéré* village. On the way, if we were lucky, we might get other salable butterflies—the blue-winged Achilles, the mauve-blotched Papillo or the Laranta Fulgens whose greenish wings sparkle like gold. Always on the trail we had traps set for the rare Agrias butterfly. On a piece of strong vine stretched between two trees by

the trail, we'd put some overripe bananas. The odor of warm ripe bananas attracts this butterfly, which is intoxicated by the fermenting juice which he sucks up. Some days we would be lucky enough to find two or three of these butterflies clinging to the fruit as we made our way homeward in the afternoon. They were a big prize, because each perfect one was worth 25 francs!

Back in our hut, tired out by the fifteen mile walk to and from the hidden clearing deep in the hot jungle, we'd sort out our catch and prepare it for market.

To my trade in butterflies I added that of souvenirs and small trinkets made by the convicts. Models of guillotines, carved coconuts, drawings of prison scenes, boxes inlaid with the various colored hardwoods, and souvenir knives. These I would collect and sell on commission to the few passengers and the members of the crews of the boats which called at Saint Laurent.

Chapter XX

The Camp of the Relégués, the Worst Outcasts of All

ONE day I learned the news that a French destroyer was going to make a visit to Saint Laurent! This would give me a chance to sell a lot of souvenirs—I should need all I could get to sell to the sailors, for whom tropical Guiana and the things made by convicts are a great curiosity. So I decided to steal an overnight visit to the notorious Camp Saint Jean where I knew I could collect many souvenirs.

Over in this seldom-visited outcast camp of the *relégués*, situated back in the jungle some fifteen miles from Saint Laurent, most of the men are perverts, and the camp is noted for the worst and most degrading forms of vice. Several of the inmates dress as women in skirts and high-heeled shoes. Many of them are syphilitic, and several have incipient leprosy. In this camp are confined some 2,000 damned souls mired down in an existence of utter degeneration.

What is their sentence . . . their crime? *None! These men are legally free.* Their life here is so hopeless, so horrible, that many of them commit a crime solely in

order to get sentenced to hard labor—because even the convicts have more freedom and better food than the *relégués* have! Buried there in Camp Saint Jean deep in the jungle, they see nobody but themselves and the guards who have charge of them.

Theoretically, the *relégué* is shipped to Guiana as an undesirable Frenchman. To cite a typical case, there's Marcel Boucher. When he was seventeen years old, he stole a bicycle—this got him four months in jail. The year following he stole some chickens from a peasant's farm—this got him six more months in jail. A year later when he was working as a dishwasher in a restaurant, he stole a wallet from another employee—six more months in jail! Then, two years after this, he stole another bicycle—six months more in prison, and Guiana for life as a *relégué!*

The *relégués* cross to Guiana in the *Martinière* convict ship with the convicts sentenced to hard labor. However, they wear civilian clothes. Their hair is not close-cropped, and they have the right to smoke and other liberties. Once in Guiana this exile is legally free to recommence his life afresh and unrestricted. Unfortunately, however, the law has not foreseen that in that rotted colony there will be no work whatever for the *relégué!* And each one of these men will represent a real danger for the Colony; for each one of them is a man, an individual who must eat to live, and if he can't earn his living working he must at all events live . . . ! And then, he's not a man of scruples.

The Penal Administration has solved the *relégué* problem. It merely sets them out in a jungle camp. Since it is necessary to watch them, it puts regular convict guards over them. Since they have to be clothed, it puts them in the red and white stripes of convicts. These men call for some sort of discipline, so it gives them the discipline dealt out to convicts. So while a convict is sentenced to years or perhaps for life at hard labor in Guiana, and while the *relégué* is sent to the depraved colony as a free man, the *relégué* has really become a convict sentenced for life! The figures fully prove the statement: 24,000 *relégués* have been sent to Guiana, 19,000 have died there. Twenty-five hundred have gained their freedom by escape. Statistics for 1930–1935 show that their death rate is even higher than that for the convicts sentenced to hard labor—55 per cent died their first year in Guiana!

And the *relégués* have no hope of a pardon, because they are free men! They have only one advantage over the man who is sentenced to hard labor . . . and that is a big advantage . . . if one of them *does* escape he has the right, after five years have elapsed, to enter France again and automatically take up all his civil and political rights as a civilian.

While many of the convicts are men who have committed one crime only in their lives, the *relégués* are always petty offenders, most of them having spent their youth in reformatories and jails where they learned all the prison vices. The convicts in Guiana look on them

as men who are too lazy to work, and too cowardly to do a big robbery. For these *relégués* are in here for cheap crimes, for stupid small thieveries, such as stealing bicycles, rabbits and chickens, and which to a real criminal have no significance, and of which he is disdainful.

The *relégués* seemingly have another advantage. They can escape time and again, since the punishment for them is only 30 days to six months in jail. But that very fact makes most of their attempts to escape fail. While a convict will struggle to succeed, because a terrible punishment awaits him if he fails, the *relégué*, knowing that he will be only lightly punished, surrenders to the penal authorities at the slightest mischance or failure. He knows he will be able to try again later.

I knew a *fort-à-bras relégué* who was keeper of one of the barracks at Saint Jean. Once a week he was in the habit of sneaking out of the camp at night. He would paddle down the Maroni in his dugout to Saint Laurent to bring me butterflies and trinkets to sell for the *relégués*, and would place orders with me for red and other bright Japanese silk, which I would cross over at night to buy in Albina.

Several times he'd invited me to go to the camp some night. But this was too risky for me, for if a guard ever caught me in Camp Saint Jean, it would have cost me several months in a prison cell!

But now that the destroyer was about to arrive, I decided to take the chance. I sent a note to Milo by the turnkey who had charge of taking provisions up to the

camp, telling him of my intention to come to Saint Jean. Milo answered by the turnkey coming back next morning, telling me where to meet him. He put a 50 franc bill in his note, and asked me to buy him two pairs of blue silk, high-heeled women's evening shoes and a bottle of rum. I supposed these were for the wife of one of the guards, so I sent Dadar over to Albina to get the things. And that same night, as soon as it was dark, we took our dugout up river to the *relégué* camp.

Milo was waiting for us. We arrived late after the barracks had been locked up for the night. We slipped into the camp and, through a loose plank in the boarding, we entered Milo's barrack.

No sooner were we inside than a young woman-man with long hair and rouged face ran toward us, caught sight of me, stopped and said shrilly: "Belbenoit"—I recognized "Coronella," whom I had known in France. "Did you bring my shoes?"

I looked at Milo. "Yes, Coronella . . . here they are," he answered. "Here they are, my pretty one!" and he handed them over. Coronella at once tripped eagerly over to his hammock near-by to try them on.

It was hard to believe that this was a man. The soft face, white with a thick layer of scented powder, the heavily rouged lips, the corsage of bright red Japanese silk, with silk skirt of the same color, the high-heeled blue silk shoes, were all those of a real woman. Even the lack of hair was concealed by a piece of silk wound round the head. We blinked. Dadar especially, who had

never seen any sight like this, was unable to conceal his amazement.

There were five or six more *relégué* women-men in the barrack dressed in female garb. They were dancing with their *forts-à-bras* to the music of an accordion. There was one of them who was made grotesque by the tattooing on his body and face; with his face copiously powdered and rouged on top of the tattooing, he was like something seen in a nightmare.

The hammocks were slung in close couples, and I could see that there were but few of the hammocks empty.

The barrack even had its own "corps de ballet," composed entirely of young perverts. We learned they were about to put on a dance.

"Coronella's the star of the corps," Milo said, admiring his *môme* from where we sat by the wall of the barrack.

There was absolutely nothing in Coronella's form or walk to show that he wasn't a woman. He lived only for vice and dancing, and his body had positively assumed a feminine appearance. To the sound of several mandolins, the "troupe" presented its dance. It was a strange sight in such surroundings with the guards grinning in at the grille in the door.

When the dancing was over there was much applause, and the dancers rejoined their admirers. Coronella came over to where we sat looking on, and kissed Milo in full view of all the barrack.

I bought up my guillotines and other trinkets and souvenirs as quickly as possible, and then Dadar and I made a bee-line for our dugout and the comparatively clean air of the river.

Chapter XXI

"Dadar's" Escape

WORKING with me, Dadar had a roof over his head. During these months when, left to his own resources, he might have starved to death, he had enough to eat, and some tobacco money—things not many *libérés* around us had. But I didn't intend to remain forever in Saint Laurent, and my mind was made up to escape as soon as the season of steady good weather at sea came.

"Take me with you," Dadar begged, "for with you gone, what will become of me here?"

I hesitated to take him with me to a foreign country, where he would be unable to provide for himself. I told him: "In four years you can go back to France—permanently free!"

"In four years, I could starve to death a thousand times here, and have a hundred chances to be recondemned!" he insisted. "Take me, René! *Take me!* What will it cost you, since you'll take four other *libérés* with you? I'm your best friend, don't leave me here!" he pleaded.

"But what are you going to do in a foreign country?" I argued with him. "You haven't any trade! You can't

speak any foreign language! How are you going to get along?"

"Oh, I'll be all right," he exclaimed. "I'll find some sort of graft. *But take me!*"

"I'd take you in a minute! But at Trinidad I expect to receive some money to continue my escape by ship, and it wouldn't be enough for both of us—you'd be stranded there!"

"That's all right," he said. "You can leave me at Trinidad. I'll learn how to take care of myself."

A week later we set out on our escape and in seventeen days we were washed ashore on Trinidad.* The money I had hoped to receive from France didn't come. My letters were unanswered, and my dreams of catching a ship bound for some American port vanished. After the month allowed us on the British island passed, I was forced to continue with my comrades in the fully-rigged lifeboat which the Trinidad authorities had so generously given us.

After twenty days at sea, our boat was wrecked on the coast of Colombia. We were all arrested by the authorities and thrown into prison at Barranquilla!

Dadar proved to me in our terrible adventure that he was a valuable friend. During arguments with the other *évadés* he had vigorously taken my part even to the point of fighting. He was strong and loyal, and the others knew it, which put a stop to all arguments. I was

* See "Dry Guillotine."

soon to learn even more of the unselfish strength of his friendship for me.

On the morning of the second of January, 1936, I was called into the office of Commandant Chegwin, Chief of the Police at Barranquilla.

"Belbenoit," he said, "the French police arrive tomorrow to pick up you and your comrades! But the people of the town are interceding for you. We know you have been badly treated. Why should you go back to Devil's Island? All of us here have confidence in you. However, your comrades—they are ordinary cases. We can't let you all escape! But we are going to fix it so that you can get out of this jail.

"This afternoon," he continued, "you are to get into an argument with one of the convicts. The jailer has his orders. He will shut you up in a cell by yourself, and tonight the door of the cell will be unlocked! Here are 100 pesos which have been given to me for you. A policeman will accompany you to the Central Plaza. There you can take an automobile for Cartagena. From there it should be easy for you to make Panama. . . . Good luck!"

I went back to the cell room. Already the news of the arrival of the French police had spread around, and my comrades were in despair at the idea of returning to Guiana.

Dadar took me to one side. "René! What do you intend to do?" he asked excitedly. "I intend to escape to-

night! I'd rather be shot by the sentries than go back! Will you take a chance with me?"

I tried my best to talk him out of it, and showed him the folly of attempting to escape under the guards' rifles. But he stubbornly insisted on taking the risk.

Then I decided to let him in on the plan the Chief of Police had outlined to me that morning.

"It's sheer suicide for you to make a break here!" I told him. "Tonight, I expect to escape with the help of the guards. As for you, go on back with the others! This is your first escape—you won't be sentenced to more than a year at hard labor. But if I go back, you know very well the Administration will send me to finish my days on the Islands.

"Dadar, a year isn't so long!" I told him earnestly. "You can trust me. I won't forget you! When I reach Panama, I'll keep sending you money. And in a year, when you're freed again, I'll send you enough money to escape easily. Don't be a fool and get yourself shot tonight!

"If you do anything crazy tonight, that won't get any of us out of here—and you'll make me lose my chance, too! And don't forget, if I escape that means you and me both!"

Dadar was obstinate, young and impetuous. I had to argue with him for hours before he'd listen to reason! Finally he agreed to follow my advice, and gave me his word he'd be quiet. The time was getting short—I gave him some of the money the Chief of Police had handed

me, then looked around to see what prisoner I could pick on for a fight.

I'm not a very big man. It would be common sense to pick somebody who couldn't whip me! For I had to be in shape to make my getaway that night. It just occurred to me that there was that little Colombian who had stolen my cigarettes. I could make *him* mad! We both weighed about a hundred pounds and I figured he couldn't lick me.

I went over to where he stood leaning against the wall and started pushing him around. Pretty soon he hit me! In the midst of our scuffle, the warden arrived on the scene. I was hustled away and locked up alone in a cell.

Night came. I was very uneasy about Dadar. Would he be overcome with panic at the last minute and attempt the impossible! The hours passed slowly. Midnight sounded from the cathedral. That meant the changing of the prison guard! Then I heard the rasp of a key turning in the lock of my cell door. It slipped open and a voice whispered, "*Listo?* Are you ready?"

"*Si Señor!* Yes!" I replied eagerly in the darkness.

I went down through the corridor between the cells. All was dead silence. At the outside gate of the prison a policeman stood waiting to direct me.

I was soon far from the town, out on my own—looking over my shoulder to see if anyone followed me! And my mind turned in hasty snatches of thought to Dadar,

who next day would also leave that prison, but with another destination.

From Panama, I wrote to some of my *libéré* friends back in Guiana, asking them to slip on to Dadar the letters I enclosed. I learned that he had been condemned to one year of hard labor, which made him a *libéré* in April, 1937. I sent him some money, advising him to wait, to be patient until I could send him a larger sum which would enable him to make ready a good escape—I was on my way from Panama to the United States, and had barely enough money to buy myself food along the way. But he wouldn't wait. The existence as a *libéré* was so terrible that he decided to try his chance!

He escaped with six other *libérés*. After twenty-one days at sea they reached Trinidad. He wrote me immediately, telling me that the British had become tired of fugitives from Guiana, who now numbered more than a hundred on the island, and that the Governor of Trinidad had given them the choice of continuing immediately by sea, or being sent back to Guiana.

So Dadar set off from Trinidad with fourteen other fugitives. And on the 22nd of January, 1938, I received this letter from him:

"My dear René:—At this moment I am in the prison of San Juan in Porto Rico, with seventeen other *évadés*. At first the authorities informed us that we were going to be deported to France, and that's why I didn't start off again with my comrades, who decided to go on and were arrested in Cuba.

"Now the authorities tell us we are going to be sent back to Guiana direct. The expense of sending us over to France is too much. If I'm sent back to Guiana, I'm going to be condemned to two years of hard labor . . . then I'll have to escape another time, and I don't know what the outcome will be.

"Can you manage to send me my passage money to France? The authorities have said that if we can pay our own cost of deportation to France, they have no objections.

"I am a *libéré*. For a mere prank I was condemned to the minimum sentence at hard labor. Furthermore, it seems that the French authorities aren't sending any more convicts to Guiana! After a few months in prison, I'll be set at liberty in France.

"My dear René, my life hangs in the balance. A matter of dollars and I am saved. Can you do this for me?

"Answer me by airmail. . . ."

I lost no time, and immediately sent a letter to the Warden of the prison of San Juan, offering to pay the passage for Dadar's deportation to France. The reply said that, in effect, there were seventeen fugitives in the prison. But that no special measures could be taken for my friend. And the Warden informed me that Dadar had to take what came to his companions.

So he was sent back to Guiana with the others and several weeks later the T.M.S. condemned him again to one year at hard labor.

Dadar was freed for the third time now on the 8th of February, 1939.

He had spent the ten best years of his life, now, in Guiana, because of a misdemeanor which any other civilized nation would have punished with only a few months in a jail.

When I read in a French newspaper in December, 1938, of the suppression of the law of *doublage*, which forces the *libérés* to live in exile in Guiana after they finish their sentences at hard labor, I went down to the office of the French Line in New York, and deposited the money for his passage from Guiana to France. He knew from my letters that his passage was secured and waiting for him months before his liberation, and it was the joy of his soul to know he could go as soon as he was set free. And in February, when he became a *libéré*, the ticket was waiting for him in the Guiana office of the French Line.

Then, I received news from Dadar that he could not leave the Colony! Other *libérés* also were not permitted to leave. *Doublage* was still in effect, although theoretically on paper it had been suppressed! The French Line wrote me inquiring if I wanted my money back.

I was deeply disappointed, but later I sent Dadar the equivalent in cash of his ticket to France by a man who was going to St. Laurent to buy butterflies and souvenirs from the *libérés*. Dadar received the cash safely, for he wrote me that he was making plans to escape, and that the money would see him far. I could give him no better advice, for he has no other way out.

Two weeks later I received another letter from him,

saying that his *évasion* was ready, and to wish him luck, for when I got his letter he would be on his way. As I write this, he is somewhere on the high seas, tossing in a frail dugout—because he still has courage to fight. What will be the end for him, and his tormented life? I try not to think. As a kid he stole a bicycle to run home to his mother. As a kid he filled his pockets with gold coins and bought ice cream with them.

As I have already said:—if the soldier-father who gave his life for his country could see what that country has done to his son, would he not curse France from his tomb?

Chapter XXII

The Penal Administration: The Underlings

IN THE early part of this year, 1939, many of the newspapers throughout the United States and abroad carried the following release:

"WASHINGTON, Feb. 27 (A.P.)—A French embassy official said today that the embassy had objected strenuously to the showing of the Warner Brothers' film, 'Devil's Island,' and that France would ban all Warner Brothers' pictures from being introduced into France for two months if the picture continued to be shown.

"The embassy, through the French consul in Los Angeles, had objected to Warner Brothers during the production of the picture, asking that it not be completed. The embassy official said the French objected in particular to the characterization of the administrators in charge of France's island penal colony."

This official stand of France forced the film to be withdrawn, and the incident brought the film company much undesirable publicity. I saw this picture. The embassy's objection was unwarranted—the characterization of the officials of the Penal Administration, to which the embassy "*objected in particular*," in no way was

overdone. In fact, the characterization was in every way mild. Whatever little there was in the film's essentially fictional plot that characterized the corruption and coarseness of the officials of the notorious prison, was barely what was needed to carry the plot in the story. The characterization was, in fact, so underdone that its factual value should have been ignored. But France, however, is determined to make every effort to stamp out, or at least to check, the growing resentment of the peoples of civilized nations towards her iniquitous prison colony established on the American continent. And she is particularly anxious to prevent this resentment being vividly aroused to the point of action on this side of the Atlantic. For she knows that, if this should ever happen, she will have to stop sending criminals overseas to America.

When Prince Louis Napoleon established the prison in Guiana in 1852, one of his ministers asked him: "By whom will you have the convicts guarded, Your Excellency?" His reply, which has gone down in history, was: "*Par des plus bandits qu'eux!*"—"By worse crooks than they are!" And such the situation has been in the past, and so it continues to be today, from the Directors of the Penal Administration right on down to the guards.

In 1932 appeared in France a book called "*Un médecin au bagne*" (Experiences of a Penitentiary Doctor). It was written by Doctor Rousseau, who was for several years in charge of the hospitals in the Penal Colony. He says:

"It is mainly the officials of the Administration who pilfer the convict's rations.

"If the officials of the Administration had been punished only three times for every hundred times they have deserved it, they would all have been sent to Saint Jean as *relégués* and made to wear the infamous red and white stripes.

"One day four bed sheets were stolen from the hospital. Promptly a dozen convicts working in the hospital were punished. A few days later, I called the guard who was in charge of investigating the incident and asked him what progress he had made.

" 'The investigation about the sheets,' he said to me, 'is completed.' Then he went away, as if he had said too much.

"The investigation, truly enough, was over. For the sheets had been found in the possession of another guard who had bought them from the convict who stole them, for a few packs of tobacco!

"One day I decided to take an inventory of the supplies in the pharmacy. When we reached Extract of Opium on the list, the official in charge of the medical supplies should have produced about four and a half pounds of the extract. He produced a large jar labeled 'Extract of Opium.' The contents of the jar smelled and looked suspicious. We summoned a convict who worked in the pharmacy, and a small quantity of the jar's contents was applied to his eyeball. In a quarter of an hour the pupil of the convict's eye was enormously dilated, proof that the keeper of the pharmacy had substituted extract of belladonna for the extract of opium to hide his theft of the latter, which, as a matter of fact, he was in the habit of smoking.

"This keeper of pharmacy, Geai, thus caught in the habit of thieving, was given the alternative of handing in his res-

ignation or of being taken to court. He elected to resign.

"A month later, one read in the *Official Journal of Guiana* that 'Monsieur Geai has been named police inspector in Saint Laurent.' "

I myself knew of the case of a guard named Beverragi, who turned into his own pocket more than 250,000 francs while he was in charge of the food supplies for the convicts on the Islands. Marius Larique, in his book, "*Les hommes punis*," (Men Undergoing Punishment) refers to this embezzlement.

In 1929, Détroyat, an official of the Administration who was in charge of the entries and exits of the hospital in Saint Laurent, skipped the Colony. With him disappeared the hospital's strong box, containing funds amounting to more than 100,000 francs. For over a year, in order to make up the deficit, the rations of the sick convicts were cut down. Détroyat was arrested in Brazil. That country's authorities deported him to Guiana as an undesirable. He was tried by the Court of Assizes in Cayenne. It acquitted him, to save the face of the Administration. He went back to France and then, after a few months, came back to Guiana reinstated as an official of the Administration. The only ones to suffer from his embezzlement were the sick convicts who had lain half-starved and dying from insufficient nourishment in the Saint Laurent hospital. And, of course, the nation's Treasury! But Détroyat had the necessary connections . . . and perhaps he knew too much for his colleagues in the Administration not to shield him.

Doctor Rousseau, who is today Surgeon General in the French Army, speaks further in his book, "*Un médecin au bagne*":

"There is only one person through whom the convict can secretly receive the money he needs for his escape—the guard! The commission is practically official, forty to sixty per cent of the sum received.

"Often, the wives of the guards are enlisted to cover up their husbands, and they receive in their own names the money sent through the mails. Not a few of them have convicts for lovers and, frequently, the husband knows about it.

"In a word, the guards, the Commandants and the other officials have but one thought: to live and get rich at the expense of the convicts."

Here is an incident to support the last statement made by Doctor Rousseau. A convict in the Cayenne penitentiary who had received a large sum of money was anxious to be recommended for a pardon. He proposed to one of the guards who was father of a small child to let the child accidentally fall into the water in a place along the water front where the current was strong. Then the convict, a fine swimmer, would save the child—and the guard would recommend him for a pardon for his bravery. The guard accepted for 1,000 francs. And shortly after the rescue, the convict received remission of two years on his sentence.

Another variation of this type of racket practiced by the officials to line their pockets at the expense of the

convicts is this: a guard will hand his wallet to a convict, who puts, let us say, 500 francs in it and then takes it to the police bureau. He says he found the wallet lying in the street. The guard gets the money, and the convict gets a recommendation for a pardon!

One of the guards, Wackenheim, amassed a good-sized fortune by using convicts to catch butterflies for him. For twelve years he was chief guard at Camp Godebert, and his wife used to buy from the convicts for a pittance quantities of butterflies, rare beetles and other insects which she resold at a large profit to dealers in Europe and the United States. Wackenheim gave the convicts who would hunt the insects all the facilities they needed, and even excused them from their work. He pretended he knew nothing about his wife's butterfly business, which she was really conducting for him, so that it could not be said that he was breaking the prison regulations. At the end of twenty-five years of service in the Administration, when he retired on a salary of approximately 1,000 francs a month, he had made for himself several million francs from this trafficking in butterflies and rare insects!

Alexis Danan, in his revealing book "*Cayenne*," is another writer who has not hesitated to speak convincingly of the many crimes committed by the guards at Devil's Island. To quote two incidents which he describes:

"The guard, Frappié, sees a convict named Poule up in

a coconut tree. The man, called to, drops the two coconuts he had gathered, slips down the tree and runs. The guard brings him to the ground with a bullet in his body. Frappié had already killed four convicts with his revolver.

"In 1933 the guard, Philidori, went into the cell of a convict in solitary confinement, fired two bullets into his body, and then ordered the Arab turnkey to take the convict's soup bowl and throw its contents over his (Philidori's) uniform. He went immediately to find the chief guard, showed him his soiled uniform and reported—'The man threw his bowl in my face and I fired because I thought I was in danger.'

"But an investigation was conducted. The turnkey confessed, and this guard, who already had murdered three convicts in an almost identical manner, was arrested and put in prison. The court sentenced him, but political friends of his intervened and obtained an annulment of the verdict. He went back to France, stayed there two years, and then came back to Guiana as a guard, with an extra stripe on his sleeve."

There are a hundred instances of the brutality of the guards of which I had personal knowledge when I was a convict. Here is one:

One night on Royal Island two convicts, Boulaygues and Roussel, made an attempt to escape. When they didn't answer the roll-call at their barrack, the guards scoured the island, but could find no trace of them. They had hidden themselves in a hole in the rocks by the shore, where little by little they had concealed a quantity of provisions. Late in the night the two came

out of their hiding-place, cut down banana trees and tied these into a raft which they meant to float in the surf. But they had had to wait too long! The tide was rising, and they could only get away from the beach when it was falling. So they hid again in their hole in the rocks.

But they had been seen by a turnkey who told the guards. Four guards came to their hiding-place, surrounded them with drawn revolvers and ordered them to come out, which they did. They were then told to walk ahead of the guards, with their hands held high. No sooner had they started toward the barrack than the guards emptied their revolvers into their backs!

Boulaygues fell first, and Roussel crumpled down on top of him. One of the guards leaned down, and saw that Roussel was dead. Boulaygues was still breathing, and so the guard fired two more shots into him! The first bullet went into his shoulder, while the second one pierced his nose. The guards then went on to headquarters, where they reported their version of the capture, thinking both the convicts were good and dead.

But Boulaygues didn't die! After a while he actually attempted to raise himself, and was seen by a turnkey. The guards ran back to finish him, but Marcheras, the infirmary attendant at the island hospital, ran up too and, seeing what the guards meant to do, stepped between them and the wounded man, and said firmly: "If you shoot him, you'll have to shoot me, too." As Marcheras, though a convict, was in high favor with the

officials as well as popular in the prison, the guards did not dare to fire. Boulaygues eventually recovered and today he is in Venezuela, where he's a butcher in the town of Puerto Cabello. Marcheras, who saved him, has also escaped and is ending his days in peace with the Christian Fathers in Barranquilla, Colombia.

Here is an instance of the lengths to which the guards will often go to get their revenge on a convict. A guard —his name was Poussard—one day surprised a convict named Thomas in the act of drinking the milk of a coconut which he had knocked down out of a coconut palm. He reported him for punishment. The convict, when brought before the disciplinary commission, pleaded that his thirst had driven him to knock the nut down from the tree, and was only lightly punished. Poussard decided to get even with him in his own way.

A few days after this, a convict fell in his tracks in a faint while at work, from an attack of fever. This same guard, Poussard, picked four men in the gang to carry the limp man to the infirmary. One of these four was Thomas. At a sharp turn in the path, Poussard came up close behind Thomas, who was walking last with the men, and shot him through the head. He then tore some buttons off his own uniform, and reported that the convict had attacked him. His word was not questioned. Not many months later he was promoted to chief guard!

Every year the French Government presents two crosses of the Legion of Honor to the officials of the Administration. In addition, all guards who have done

fifteen years' service are decorated with the Military Medal.

Every year on the 14th of July, the guards hold a banquet, after a review and the formal salute to the flag, to celebrate (French) Independence Day. On the 14th of July, 1934, the guards on Royal Island picked the German convict, Peter Klemms, to serve the banquet. They had 350 French convicts to choose from—but they picked this non-commissioned officer of the French Foreign Legion who had deserted and gone over to the enemy, and become Chief of Staff of the forces of the rebel Arab chieftain, Abd El Krim! He had directed the attacks of the revolted Riffs against France! When Abd El Krim surrendered, Klemms had been condemned to death by a Courtmartial. Only the intervention of the German government saved him from the firing squad, and he was sent to Guiana for life at hard labor.

And the guards of the prison, who all have the rank of non-commissioned officer in the French Army, chose this traitor to serve at their formal celebration of this patriotic date!

On this same 14th of July, a top-ranking guard named Mouton had the distinction of being decorated for his services with the coveted Médaille Militaire, that high decoration of the French Army. He may be taken as the type par excellence of those ruthless, Corsican guards.

When I was an incorrigible on Royal Island in 1929,

Mouton was in charge of the disciplinary quarters. Every night, almost, he would roam about outside the Crimson Barrack of the incorrigibles, with the sole purpose of catching us talking. The sides of the barrack being of solid wood he couldn't see inside. So, at the spot where he heard the sound of an *inco's* voice through the wall, he would make a mark with his knife blade. And next morning, when the barrack was unlocked, he would go and find out who were the men who slept behind the mark he had cut, and would write out a report for their punishment. The regulations require that, for a convict to be relieved from the status of "incorrigible" he must serve at least six months of his punishment, the last three months of which had to be without any reports against him. Mouton took a sadistic delight in making a report against a man a few days before he completed the six months as an incorrigible with the required good conduct! And that convict would then have to do another term of six months on the rock-gang, where he had to crack rocks all day long under the blistering sun and sleep every night with his feet in irons.

A few years before my experience with him on Royal Island in 1929, Mouton had been in charge of opening a new camp for incorrigibles in the heart of the jungle swamps. The *incos* were sent to cut a fresh supply of heavy hardwood pilings which the Administration needed to repair its rotted pier at Saint Laurent.

Mouton and the other guard with him to help look

after the gang of forty men lived and slept under awning and mosquito netting on a flat-bottomed barge anchored out in the middle of a creek running through the swamp. The gang of men was quartered in chains along the wet bank.

The very first day, Mouton announced to his *incos* that when they finished their day's work they could go and trap animals in the forest and bleed sap from rubber trees. He named the price he would pay them for the results of their hunting: one package of tobacco for each piece of game; also a package of tobacco for every two pounds of rubber they brought him. He knew the men wouldn't try to escape through that vast waste of swamp country, even if they could get together enough provisions. And these they couldn't get at, for he kept the camp supplies on the barge, under lock and key. They'd rather bring him the game and rubber, so that they could smoke! The game thus obtained Mouton would send back to his superiors at Saint Laurent, welcome presents which cost him nothing. And the rubber he sold to the merchants at Saint Laurent at a twenty-fold profit!

But the work of chopping down mammoth hardwood trees to make pilings for the pressing needs of the Administration's dock, however, came before everything. Every day from dawn to afternoon, the *incos* were out in the flooded jungle half naked, in mud up to their knees and waists, wielding axes under the hordes of tormenting mosquitoes and flies. After two or three weeks of that sort of existence the fever began its ravages. One

man after another came down with malaria, and the men insisted on a doctor coming to the camp.

Mouton finally sent off to Saint Laurent for a doctor. But the morning the doctor was to come, he took care to have his turnkeys chain to a long heavy log lying in the jungle several hundred yards from camp, all the *incos* who were sickest and also the rebellious ones who might complan of conditions to the doctor. And so, when the doctor arrived, Mouton showed him for medical examination about twelve men who were in fairly good state of health. The doctor distributed among them some tins of condensed milk, and went off back to Saint Laurent laden down with a large present of game. He had seen the stack of pilings, and had a favorable report to make of conditions at Mouton's camp!

Two of the fever-ridden *incos* died chained to the log the day of his visit, and others who were tottering from the malaria began to grumble and murmur threats. Some plotted to get to Saint Laurent at any price and tell the high officials what was being done at the camp. There was just one way to do this—steal the small dugout the guards used for going back and forth from the barge to the shore. This would be dangerous, because the convict who was Mouton's favored attendant, a German who was hated by the other men almost as much as they hated Mouton himself, slept in the dugout every night, after he had moored it securely to the side of the barge.

Very late one night two of the *incos* finally managed

to squirm out of their chains, and waded into the water. Swimming silently they slowly approached the dugout and got Mouton's protégé by the throat. But the man had time to give one yell! Mouton and the other guard woke up under their mosquito nets and, scrambling to their feet, fired their revolvers pointblank into the struggling forms in the dugout. The German convict and the two *incos* who'd attacked him were riddled by the broadside of bullets.

Mouton realized that his crazed *incos* were about to revolt, and he decided to give them an example. He put one of the *incos* inside the metal-lined hold of the barge and had a big fire lit above him on top. The man, half roasted by the heat, yelled and screamed hoarsely, "Forgive me . . . Forgive me!" And after a while Mouton let him scramble out.

But this didn't impress all the *incos*. The next morning some of them refused to go to work. Mouton, livid with rage, called all his turnkeys, and had them kick the convict gang out into the swamp to chop trees under brandished revolvers.

Four months later when the camp was closed down, the work completed, twenty-eight of the forty *incos* were dead. But Mouton, in the indifferent eyes of the Administration, had done a good job, and was appointed to command the Administration's official launch which plies the Maroni between camps. This launch, the *Mélinon*, was a wood-burner and was manned by a crew of

four convicts. Every time he moored her at Saint Laurent, Mouton would make his crew draw the fire in the boiler-furnace and would remove an essential part of the machinery before he went ashore, leaving his men on the launch to clean the boat. One afternoon, however, when Mouton had gone on shore as usual with the piece from the engine under his arm, the crew quickly substituted a duplicate part which they had made, started up the extinguished fire with gasoline and slipped down river with the launch, leaving Mouton yelling and dancing on the bank behind them.

Two days later, when the wood supply for the boiler was exhausted, the *évadés* tried to make shore. But the launch ran on the rocks on the coast of British Guiana. The four convicts were arrested and sent back to Saint Laurent.

Mouton lost his stripes for negligence. But he got them back in less than a year. He was then a guard at the main *incos*' camp of Charvein, and learned one day that some *évadés* who were hiding out in the jungle were coming twice a week to the edge of camp to exchange their butterflies with the convicts for food and money.

Mouton went out into the jungle on a day when these *évadés* were accustomed to visit the camp and ambushed himself in the thick undergrowth by the narrow trail where they would pass. After a while they came along. There were three of them, marching in single file one behind the other. When they were close to him, Mouton

fired. Two of the men, who happened to be brothers, were shot dead by the same bullet, and the third man gave himself up without resistance.

With this deed, Mouton won back his stripes! And now, having lined his pockets well in his years of service, having lived a life of graft, murder, hard drinking and good eating, while doomed men around him were dying of hunger, he will soon retire and go back to France with the pension the French government will give him for his long years of service in the Penal Colony, and on his proud chest the Médaille Militaire.

But in 1937 there appeared in France the book which created a real sensation, "*Bagne*" (Penitentiary), by a woman lawyer of the Paris Courts who had spent several months in French Guiana in 1936—Mireille Maroger. The officials of the Administration brought charges against her for libel because of a series of what she wrote about them. She publicly refused to consider a proposition made by Director Valent, who offered to drop the charges against her in the courts if she would admit publicly that the things she had written about the Administration were untrue. Unfortunately, in the latter part of 1937, she accidentally met her death in a crash while flying her sport-plane, and the case, which might have smashed the Penal Administration, was dropped.

Mireille Maroger describes the guards aboard ship while on her way to Guiana:

"One guard is just like all other guards. All this pretty crew was returning from leave of absence and going back to Guiana. Until we reached Fort-de-France (Martinique) we hadn't seen them, then suddenly they appeared from we didn't know where; from the holds, from between decks, and settled themselves in first class.

"They took over the whole ship as if they ruled it, drinking large glasses of red wine, wiping their mustaches on their shirtsleeves, and discussed colony matters.

"They offered to place themselves at my service.

" 'On my honor,' a brute said to me, 'anything you want, I'll get for you. A convict suit, a guillotine model to snip cigarettes with, a real *plan* that's even been used . . . !'

"Another exclaimed to me: 'Do you know how we take a *plan* from a convict? Laxatives are perfectly useless! Besides, the doctor doesn't like the idea. You just tell the convict, "Raise up your arms, high!" And then you drive your knee hard right into his stomach. Sometimes, he's got to go to the hospital!'

"Another offered: 'For 300 francs I will take you to see the lepers' island . . .'

"Everything has been told about the guards of the penal colony, their Directors have all held the same thoughts about them. Their brutality, their ignorance, their dishonesty are obvious. But what impressed me most is rather their villainy, their malicious hatreds, and the dread of their superiors—their dread of any man who can write everything he thinks."

Francis Carco, in "*La route de Devil's Island*," described the guards of Guiana:

"The night before, a number of guards had arrived at

Saint Martin de Ré to take possession of their human cargo. Tanned, bilious, quick tempered and sarcastic, they swaggered their gold banded uniforms in the cafés and courted the prostitutes. They were devoid of any sort of good traits of character. Some of them stank of alcohol and cheap perfume. I don't envy anyone the misfortune of falling into the hands of these sinister individuals."

These various incidents and impressions which I have quoted are all by people of unquestionable standing. I might, having been a convict, be accused of bias. But, with the exception of the descriptions of the Penal Colony which have been written by paid newspaper men sent to visit Guiana by the French government, I have yet to hear of an opinion in favor of the Penal Colony, or of one which speaks with respect of the officials of the Administration.

Chapter XXIII

The Penal Administration: The Higher-Ups— The Affair of Director Prével

THE Directors of the Penal Administration are no better than the guards. Their grafts are only bigger, and their crimes less blunt.

When I first arrived in Guiana in 1923 the Director was a negro named Tell. Previously, he had been Commandant of the penitentiary at Saint Laurent. Accused at that time of having sold the flour intended for the convicts, and fearing an investigation, he resorted to this stratagem, which worked beautifully. He appeared one morning in the sun-scorched streets of Saint Laurent, wearing just his shirt and a pair of drawers; over his shoulder like a drum he carried a gasoline can, and in each hand he held a drum stick. And down the glaring streets of Saint Laurent he went, solemnly beating away on his tin can! He was taken to hospital . . . and from there he went to a sanitarium in France for observation and treatment. "Overwork, and the tropical climate . . ." the official report said. When he returned to Guiana six months later he came promoted in rank. He was made Assistant Director. And of course, his flour-supply swindle was forgotten.

It was while Tell was Director of the prison that the master-clock destined for the Saint Laurent penitentiary was sold to Albina over across the river in Dutch Guiana. It adorned the church tower there. The bricks of the church, also, were marked "A.P."—that is to say, "Administration Pénitentiaire." Instead of having been used to build housing for the convicts, for which purpose they had been sent from France, they had found a market across the river, and the proceeds of their sale had lined the pockets of someone in the Administration.

In 1924 Director Tell was retired, and Colonel Prével arrived in Guiana in the month of April to take his place as head of the Penal Administration. This new Director had seen many years' service with the French Army in Africa.

A convict, named Monmon, became his personal servant shortly after he arrived in the Penal Colony. Monmon was in the prime of youth, barely 23 years old. He had been sentenced to five years at hard labor for a robbery and was now about to finish his term. He was a handsome youth—and the rumor ran among the convicts that the wife of one of the guards in Saint Laurent, Goguet, was his mistress and lover. But, within a few months of Director Prével's arrival, the convicts and also the civilians in Saint Laurent were whispering that a sexual liaison existed between the new Director and his convict servant!

Around the end of the year Monmon completed his sentence and became a *libéré*. Thanks to the help of

guard Goguet's wife, and of the Director's wife also, he set himself up in business with a bakery shop. And every night, when Monmon closed his shop, he would go to the Director's house, where he was received equally well by Director Prével and his amorous wife. When, in the first months of 1925, the town of Saint Laurent was destitute of flour, Monmon obtained permission from his admiring protector, Director Prével, to use the supplies of the Penal Administration which were supposed to be used to feed the convicts. The other bakers had to close down, while he was able to make good profits because his flour was provided free.

Then, one day, Monmon closed down his shop and took to sea with four other *libérés*. He had saved enough money, he thought, to make good his escape to a country where he would be completely free. But their dugout was wrecked off the coast of French Guiana. Monmon was the only one of the five *évadés* able to swim to shore. Being a *libéré,* he wasn't punished, because he hadn't gone beyond the boundaries of the Colony. But he had lost everything. When he came back to Saint Laurent he found he was no longer to enjoy his former privileges.

Just at this time, another *libéré,* who worked as bookkeeper in the town hall at Saint Laurent, lost his job because Director Prével had ordered his removal for personal motives. The man decided to take his revenge against the Director by exposing his immorality. He could write well, and knew all about the Director's sex-

ual perversions, just as did the rest of the population of Saint Laurent. He threatened, at the same time, to make a public issue of the Director's having diverted the prison's flour supplies into the hands of Monmon. And Director Prével began to have good reason to become worried and uneasy.

Monmon, when this situation had come to a head, was in the hospital with fever. Lying on the bed next to him was a *libéré* named Marcou, who'd been re-condemned to a ten-year sentence for robberies he had committed in Cayenne. Monmon suggested to Marcou that he eliminate the *libéré* who was going around making a public scandal of his sexual relationship with Director Prével!

Eliminating a man in Guiana is not a thing to frighten any condemned man, especially when the intended victim is another condemned man—and the deed is to be done for the Director, who will give a generous reward. Marcou accepted. The only hitch was that he had to get out of the Blockhouses, where he was doing part of his ten-year solitary confinement sentence in one of the cells.

"I'll take care of that for you," Monmon assured him.

The very next morning after Marcou was sent back from the hosptal to his cell in the Blockhouses, he was summoned to the office of the chief guard, who informed him that he was being sent to work for a civilian and that he would sleep in the town at night.

That same night, Marcou was ushered into Director Prével's office, where he received his instructions behind

locked doors. On the Director's desk lay an envelope containing 5,000 francs—this money would be his when he had silenced the *libéré*. "With this," Director Prével assured him, "you'll have no trouble passing over into Dutch Guiana and making good your escape!" And since Marcou had no knife or revolver, Director Prével gave him one of his own revolvers . . . for Marcou was to do the job that very night.

Unluckily, however, he was picked up by the police a few hours later for being on the streets after ten o'clock. The revolver, which was found on him, had Director Prével's initials plainly engraved on the butt, and the fact was duly set down in the records at the police bureau.

A week later Marcou was tried by the T.M.S. for carrying a prohibited weapon. But, to the great surprise of all, the revolver in question had mysteriously vanished. And Marcou was sent back to the Blockhouses.

Not long after this a *libéré* named Landru, who was also in the disciplinary quarters of the Blockhouses and was a close friend of Marcou, was called to Director Prével's office. Landru was an Army man who'd been condemned by a Courtmartial, and a letter had just been received from Premier Léon Blum recommending him for a pardon. When Landru got back to the Blockhouses, he told Marcou: "Same job as you!" He'd been put up to the same task which Marcou had failed to execute, as the price for being granted his pardon.

Landru was released from the Blockhouses. . . . A

couple of days later, a *libéré* sitting at a table in one of the dingy food shops in Saint Laurent was killed by a shot fired at him from the street. Later that night Landru came to Director Prével's office to tell him about his mistake—he had shot the wrong man! But the Director was now even more eager to be rid of his former favorite, Monmon, who was beginning to wag too long a tongue. He told Landru to let the other *libéré* alone and get Monmon. "See to it you don't make any mistake this time," he said warningly. "The request for your pardon is on its way, and you can go back to France with money in your pocket."

Landru, daring to make no mistake this time, in order to get complete information about his victim's habits made inquiries of the self-appointed detective of Saint Laurent—an Arab *libéré* named Kélifi. The son of an Arab policeman, Kélifi had that psychological twist of nature peculiar to the Arab, which made him a patient hypocrite par excellence. He had inherited a natural taste for sleuthing from his father; and from the very day, almost, that he became a *libéré*, he had made himself the self-appointed detective of the town. There was plenty to intrigue one with his tastes in that crime-village!

Kélifi, subtle and intelligent, had used his aptitudes to make plenty of money for himself. He had organized, under his personal direction, a veritable system of informers. The Arab turnkeys had no secrets from him . . . the Arabs working as servants in the homes of the guards would tell him all that went on among the officials

. . . and through the Arab *libérés*, who are the only ones that have ready money and because of this are receivers for things stolen by the convicts, Kélifi usually knew very quickly who was guilty of any theft in Saint Laurent. The gendarmerie, even, used him as a source of information; and Director Prével, himself, knew through him what went on among the guards and higher officials. And the Governor, too, resorted to him when in extreme need for information about the activities of the officials of the Penal Administration.

Needless to say, Kélifi took commissions and graft from all sides, denouncing the guards to the Director, the convicts to the gendarmerie, and the Director to the Governor of the Colony! He was ever ready to profit from any information which came to his knowledge. He knew all . . . he saw everything. He was the one who first denounced and made known to the Governor the private sex-life of Director Prével with his servant Monmon, as a result of which the supreme head of the Colony had requested officially that Director Prével cease receiving the *libéré* Monmon at his house.

Kélifi, when Landru came to him for exact information about the habits of Monmon, his intended victim, told him everything he wanted. But he then went immediately to Monmon and warned him about the conspiracy against his life, in the hope of obtaining further details about the Director's homosexual activities, a matter which interested him greatly.

That same night, just after dark, Landru made his way

cautiously to the place where Monmon lived, intending to hide in the shadows and wait for his victim to come out to the street. No lights burned in that corner of the *libéré* village. Suddenly three revolver shots flashed in the darkness, and Landru fell mortally wounded. Monmon, forewarned by Kélifi, had been waiting for him, and had shot him down in his tracks.

Landru was taken to the hospital, where the police came to make a report of the incident. Landru didn't dare tell the truth and accuse the Director of the Administration. He didn't know he was dying, and he knew full well that if he talked he would be signing his own death-warrant! But, suspecting that he'd been betrayed by Kélifi, he accused him of having instigated him to murder Monmon. And he died that same night with that single confession on his lips!

Kélifi and Monmon were both arrested. A few months later, Monmon was tried by the Court of Assizes in Cayenne—he was acquitted, as having acted in legitimate defense, and received only a fine of 100 francs for carrying a prohibited firearm. Kélifi, on the other hand, awaited his judgment with complete confidence. The charges against him were not of a serious nature. He had persistently denied having prompted Landru to murder Monmon. What interest could he possibly have had in the murder of this *libéré!* Crimes among *libérés* are not usually punished severely—and he was not guilty of having killed anyone. But now, however, the cards were stacked against his clever and nimble hand. He was in a

trap, and there was no way out! The court sentenced him to hard labor for life, and a special order of the Penal Administration declared that he was to be sent to St. Joseph to serve his sentence.

Following rapidly upon Kélifi's isolation on the Islands, the official who was Director Prével's right hand man and worked with him in his office, was appointed to St. Joseph as chief guard. Strange coincidence . . . !

A few days afterwards, Kélifi barely escaped being assassinated on St. Joseph by one of the guards. He had been sent to work in one of the gardens to pull up weeds, when shots were fired at him. The bullets grazed his head, and it was almost a miracle that he was able to scramble out of the small garden in which he was working! Later, the guard declared he'd seen Kélifi stealing vegetables in the garden, and had ordered him to put them down—but Kélifi had run away, so he fired on him. Kélifi, fearing for his life, asked to be transferred over to Royal Island. But this was refused.

In 1929, when I was on St. Joseph myself, he narrowly escaped being made a victim of a second attempt. The chief guard, whose main concern was to eliminate Kélifi, proposed to two convicts to prepare an escape. They were allowed to make a raft in a secluded spot on the island, and they were to ask Kélifi to escape with them. Now, Kélifi was suspected of having a large sum of money. At least a dozen times all his belongings had been suddenly seized and searched, but no money had ever been found. On one occason he had been set upon

by two convicts in the privy of the barrack, who thought he carried a *plan* . . . but they'd discovered he had none. Everyone on the island thought that he had buried his money in the ground somewhere! So then, if he could be induced to escape, he would collect this money and would have it on him when he got on the raft with the other two convicts. All they would have to do was murder him that night . . . and the money they found on him would be their price for the crime! Then they would get back to their barrack, after they had thrown his body in the sea. But Kélifi was warned in time, thanks to a convict named Hut, who had overheard a conversation about this attempt to murder him.

In 1933 Kélifi was finally assassinated on the Islands. The man who killed him, a negro convict, was taken to the mainland for trial. He wasn't even able to tell the court any reason which had caused him to commit the crime! He was, so to speak, summarily excused, and sent back to the Islands from Saint Laurent. A few days later he disappeared mysteriously—completely, without a trace! What happened to him? No one can say. Some believed he was drowned, others that a shark got him when he was swimming. The fact remains that he vanished.

There now remained only Marcou to be silenced, for Monmon, the other remaining witness to Director Prével's criminal actions, had been authorized in 1928 to go to Brazil where he settled down, found a job and remade his life. He has become one of the chief agents of the

French company which provides an airline service between Brazil and Argentina. And it is only the stigma of his past which prevents him from receiving the decoration of the Legion of Honor.

Marcou had tried to escape. But he was caught, and sent to St. Joseph to do three years in solitary confinement. Director Prével had promised him he would grant him conditional liberation when he had done a third of his sentence. When Marcou had finished a third of his sentence, he wrote his petition to the Director for a conditional release. But the reply was "Rejected." Marcou realized that Director Prével had double-crossed him. And he knew why! The Director was sacrificing him in cold blood in order to keep him quiet.

Desperate, Marcou wrote open letters to all the officials and authorities in the Colony, telling all he knew about Director Prével. The Governor himself, and also the Attorney General, received these letters. The scandal grew. But was fraught with too much danger, weighing it from their own personal standpoints, for any one of them to assume the responsibility of exposing it. Enough such scandals had fallen into the hands of the press. It would not do, for them, as officials of the Colony, to uncover such an unsavory mess. And so Marcou's pleading letters were never considered, and never even received the civility of a reply.

In 1934, just one year after Kélifi was disposed of, an order arrived from the Ministry of the Colonies in Paris to have Marcou examined as to his sanity. Marcou was

taken to the doctor for examination. But the doctor, who had been given his instructions by the Administration, was fortunately an Army officer and a man of principle. "Let the officials of the Administration wash their dirty linen themselves!" he declared. And he reported Marcou was perfectly sane.

Then, finally, with his last incriminating witness miraculously still alive, Director Prével was retired in 1934 and went to France.

While I was working in the archives of the Colony, I found two letters bearing on the Prével case. One was from the Governor to Director Prével, requesting him not to receive the *libéré* Monmon any more at his house. The other letter was from Kélifi, and addressed to the Governor, asking him for justice, because he had been condemned for a crime of which the Director of the Administration was really guilty. On this letter was written in red pencil, "For files," with the signature, "Thaly, Governor."

I knew Kélifi on the Islands, where he was murdered under orders. I also knew Marcou—in 1934 I was in detention in the Blockhouses with him, when he was the nervous sole survivor of Director Prével's criminal despotism. Marcou made it possible for me to reconstruct the case.

When, after ten years as Director, Colonel Prével was retired, Valent, who is Director at the time of this writing, took charge in January, 1934.

Mireille Maroger speaks of him in "*Bagne*." In consequence of the appalling facts, which she fearlessly wrote in her book, the Penal Administration was forced into setting into action all the political power of its corrupt machinery:

Here is one of her true stories: "It was aboard the S.S. Antilles, at the officers' table, at the end of the meal. The Director of the Penal Administration, Monsieur Valent, was entertaining us with a story about Coronella, the 'star danseuse' of the corps de ballet at Saint Jean du Maroni.

"The ballet corps which from time to time gives performances for the guards of Guiana and the high officials, is composed entirely of sex perverts, and to perform their dances these condemned men transform themselves into ballerinas. Everything's lace, veils, and dainties of tulle. Their faces are painted up, powdered; their bodies are perfumed and, when the ballet commences, as one watches the suppleness of the steps, the gracefulness of the poses, and the shapeliness of the legs, no matter what layman, who hadn't been told in advance, would be deceived and would believe he was looking at professional women dancers.

"The Director, then, was telling us about this star, and under the stimulation of the wines, he had gotten to his feet.

"With gestures to illustrate, he described to us, mimicking the gestures, the stage entrance of Coronella, advancing on the points of his toes with doll-like gestures.

"At the sight of a director of a prison, in uniform, cutting such capers, I was seized by such an ungovernable access of laughter that I found it almost impossible to remain at the table.

"Then he related the following story:

"A murder having been committed at Saint Jean, the suspected murderer and Coronella, who was thought to have been the cause of the crime, were sent to Cayenne for trial.

"Both were acquitted, although the judges were convinced of their guilt.

"Not long after this, while on an inspection of Saint Jean, he (Director Valent) stopped before Coronella and said to him: 'Well, will you tell me today why he was murdered?'

"At this, artlessly and no longer afraid any more, Coronella lifted his large, mascara-shaded eyes to the Director's face and said calmly: 'Why, because of love, *Monsieur le Directeur*.'

"When he had finished this story over the oysters and the foie gras which he had generously ordered served at our table, Monsieur Valent triumphantly waved before us a bit of dainty, delicate material. It was an intimate wisp of silken underwear which the guards at Saint Jean had discovered in their last search of the barracks."

Shortly after Director Valent's arrival in Guiana I managed to obtain a talk with him in his office, when I told him the particulars of my case and explained to him the brutal way I had been condemned in Cayenne to three additional years at hard labor. He listened sympathetically, and seemed inclined to help me and shield me from further injustices. For he had assumed the directorship of the prison apparently firmly decided to put order into the Administration and put a stop to the flagrant abuses committed by the officials. I even profited by the occasion of his granting me an audience to point out

certain conditions which existed in the Blockhouses at Saint Laurent at the time; and he said he would investigate them.

A few days later he had taken steps to that effect, punishing several of the guards and removing from his position the chief guard of the Disciplinary Quarter (Blockhouses). The news went out among the convicts that, at last, there was a Director who would see that their rights were considered, and their complaints showered his office. And Director Valent, having to deal at the same time on the other hand with the officials of the Administration under him, was beginning to realize that his task would be a tough one.

Alas! . . . a thousand times alas! A month after he arrived, on the next boat from France came the bundles of newspapers (which many of the convicts always manage to get) in which were articles and editorials referring to the new Director with headlines such as: "To become Director of the Penal Colony, it's enough to start life as a swindler!"

The newspaper "L'Action Française" carried a cartoon of a policeman talking with his superior. The caption read: "And Valent, what did they do with him?" His chief answered: "He's already in Guiana! They just have to leave him there!"

We convicts in the barracks and the officials of the Administration read that our new Director stood accused of being an accomplice in the major swindle scandal known as the Alexander II affair, second only to the

famous Stavisky, or Alexander I, affair and involving hundreds of millions of francs! The knowledge of this rocked the faith of the condemned in the new Director, and lost him the respect of the officials in the Penal Colony, who sneered openly: "How's this? This individual the Police accuse of complicity in a famous swindle, how can he have the nerve to stick his nose into our little affairs here!"

And so it came to pass that in a few days the good start he had made fizzled out, and the new Director made a right-about face. From this time on he walked hand in hand with the officials of the Penal Administration. And, naturally enough, he has looked out for his own interests just like all the others. The convicts themselves dubbed him "Stavisky". And before I escaped from Guiana in 1935, I knew of cases where *libérés*, half mad with hunger and wanting to be put in jail to get enough food to keep from starving, stopped him in the street and yelled the insult in his face.

Chapter XXIV

A Crucified Colony

EVERY civilized nation possessing a colony stands today before the world in a position of responsibility for that colony.

It is the plain duty of every civilized nation towards its colony to bring to it the benefits of progress, of the humanities and of civilization.

What has France brought to French Guiana except shame and crime? How is it that a nation like France can tolerate a condition which no single voice in France would dare to lift itself to justify?

French Guiana is a crucified colony. The jungle has invaded the former flourishing plantations, and, since the establishment of the prison, no agriculture, no industry has come to take their place. Guiana is, however, a colony rich in opportunities for colonization and in natural resources. It deserves more than to have been reduced to a colonial ghost.

Governor after Governor, arriving in French Guiana to take up executive duties for a term of office lasting two years, has realized the existing possibilities for exploiting the Colony. One and all they have tried to find

some means to organize the stagnant convict man-power for productive labor. One Governor has realizable dreams of developing large-scale coffee plantations; another thinks of cacao—or sugar, cotton, bananas, cattle for meat. These civil heads of the Colony, one should add, are usually commencing their careers in the higher brackets of the colonial service. With a sincere desire to make a commendable record, their chief concern is to attempt to pull the ruined Colony up by its boot-straps.

However, after they have been in office a few months, they realize the impossibility of promoting any development in French Guiana. From the civilian element of the population they receive no support, for this element consists of, for the most part, ignorant negroes and Chinese merchants, since, today, in that degenerate colony few self-respecting Frenchmen or nationals of any other country will settle. The *libérés* set adrift and forced to live there in exile have but one thought—to escape.

Most important of all, there is the Penal Administration which has worked systematically to keep French Guiana in a state of complete ruin. The officials of the Administration hold the key position in Guiana.

The Administration has any energetic and well-intentioned Governor beaten before he starts. While he is there for only two years, at the most, and is unfamiliar with the way of things in the Colony when he arrives to take office, the Administration is there permanently, its officials devoting their entire lives to the career and retiring after twenty-five years' service. The officials

will agree to a Governor's plans for development of the Colony and to make the convict labor productive. Then they undermine his plans with the force of inertia. If it should be agreed to clear a piece of land for large-scale planting, the Administration finds ways to take six months' time to get two months' work done. And it sits back complacently, for it knows that at the end of the two years a new Governor will come, and it can point out the present Governor's idea as an impractical undertaking. And if the new Governor tries another idea of his own, it can meet his constructive efforts with the same tactics—with an incombatable and deadly force of inertia. And sometimes, when a Governor is too obstinate, the Administration will go so far as to trump up some apparently good reason for having him recalled, which is always a blot on that official's political career. Governor André Juvanon, in his introduction to Doctor Rousseau's "*Un médecin au bagne*," remarks: "I am bewildered by what I have discovered little by little about the Penal Administration; one hesitates to make generalizations, and yet, one might ask himself if there are even a few honest persons in the personnel." And so a Governor soon comes to realize philosophically that the task of making French Guiana produce or even stand on its own feet is all but impossible in the face of the all-powerful Administration, which runs the convicts and French Guiana for its own purposes.

The Penal Administration receives a half-million dollars a year from the French Treasury to run the prison.

It has absolute control of more than three thousand convicts, it cares for about that many *relégués*, and could—and should—provide work for one thousand five hundred starving *libérés*. But there is no work, no production. It is not the fault of the climate and the soil of French Guiana. One need only point to the adjacent Dutch and British Guianas for a clear contrast—they are self-supporting colonies, they have roads, agriculture, industry and commerce. French Guiana, across the river, is a colonial shambles. The fault lies directly with the heavy impeding hand of the Penal Administration, and the reason for its systematic opposition to any form of productiveness or development is that, as soon as there are progress and self-sufficiency in the Colony, there will be less money and supplies coming from France to line the pockets of the Administration officials.

Virtually all raw products and manufactured products used in French Guiana are imported; and most of them are used for the prison. Along the coast there are immense grasslands where cattle could be raised profitably. But the Colony has no more than 500 head of cattle! The Administration finds it more advantageous to import beef on the hoof from Venezuela and Brazil than to maintain herds tended by the convicts, or to even provide a market for local ranchers. Bananas, rice, sugar, corn grow native in the Colony. The convicts could be put to work to grow these, and to raise enough vegetables and other foods to feed themselves. They could grow the cotton for their crude prison clothes. But in-

stead, the Administration sets its man-power to eternally pulling weeds, and other unproductive labor, and receives all these supplies in the form of imports from France. It also receives the money to buy supplies from the neighboring countries. Then its officials resell these imported supplies, and also divert a large proportion of the money sent for the maintenance of the convicts into their own pockets.

All industrial or capitalist enterprises in French Guiana rapidly end in failure. The Penal Administration uses its evil power to balk their progress. Not many years ago an enterprising mining company with capital from the United States started to operate the gold mines at the Hermina Falls on the Maroni River. From the very start the company's operations showed successful results. But the officials of the Administration decided that the presence of Americans living in the Colony, who might criticize the prison abroad from first-hand knowledge, threatened their interests. And the Administration began its destructive work. Whenever a ship arrived, bringing machinery and supplies for the company, the guards found ways to hold up the work of the convicts let out under contract to work for the company, refusing to let them do any work until after the ship left. All sorts of inexcusable delays and impediments made practical operation impossible for the company. After a year of this, of having to bicker and fight constantly for co-operation, the company understood. And it aban-

doned the project, leaving all its machinery to rot on the river bank.

Enormously rich forests of valuable hardwoods, dyes, resins, gums, and medicinal extracts exist in French Guiana—still awaiting commercial exploitation. Gold is found in the beds of all the rivers, but is not worked. Other ores and precious metals and stones occur in French Guiana—silver, copper, mercury, platinum, iron, garnets, rubies, diamonds, topazes, amethysts. But all this wealth of resources lies there untouched.

French Guiana, after more than three hundred years as a colony, had only butterflies and stuffed monkeys to send to the French Colonial Exposition in Paris in 1931. The Colony's sole product, one might say, if one may call it such, is the *évadé*. The fugitive condemned man is the only product of this single French colony on the American continent—the *évadé*, who can be found in almost every city and town along the Caribbean and has made the name of Frenchman synonymous with criminal. This product of the Colony the surrounding countries have to pay high for. You can find the *évadé* in the slums of Panama and New Orleans . . . panning gold and smuggling emeralds in the hills of Colombia and Venezuela . . . trafficking in white slaves in Rio and Buenos Aires. The attractive little souvenirs made of colored crude rubber, a familiar sight to tourists on tropical cruises to the Caribbean, are usually made by him, for the *évadés* have taken this art with them from

Guiana. In the ports they have natives for partners, who can sell the souvenirs aboard ships and in the hotel lobbies.

One million dollars a year is what is costs the French Treasury and the taxpayers to maintain the prison. With the free convict labor, French Guiana could even grow surplus produce which would find a ready market in the surrounding countries. But even the sugar, the shoes, blankets, bricks, cement, rice, beans, coffee, and many other items have to be imported from France for the convicts. The Penal Administration wants no curtailment of the 20,000,000 francs a year it receives from the Treasury for the convict up-keep!

More than 56,000 convicts have been sent to Devil's Island. To this total of 56,000 convicts sentenced to hard labor is to be added the 24,000 *relégués* banished to life exile in Guiana. The transportation of *relégués* was suspended, presumably definitely, in 1937, but since that year more than 1,000 more have been shipped to the Penal Colony. And finally, one must add to the above figures the 1,000 or more deportees who have been deported to Guiana. Most of these men have been Frenchmen. The others are Indo-Chinese, Arabs, Germans, Italians, Spaniards, Moroccans, Poles, Danes, Swedes, Portuguese, Russians, Negroes from the colonies in Africa, and some Latin Americans.

In all, over 80,000 condemned men have been shipped to French Guiana and placed under the supervision of the Penal Administration, to atone for their crimes and

for the purposes of colonization. Out of the 56,000 condemned to hard labor, in every hundred of them fifty were sentenced to from five to eight years at hard labor, twenty to as many as ten years, and only thirty were sentenced to hard labor for life. The price they have paid for their crimes is cruel. Eighty-eight per cent of the total of 80,000 have left their bones in French Guiana! Since 1852, the convicts have died at the rate of more than one every day, while serving their sentence. Out of one thousand convicts, there are not a hundred who live as long as five years. Only 18,000 have lived to become *libérés*, and of these 18,000 *libérés* barely 5,000 lived to see the end of their enforced residence in the Colony. It really means, therefore, that a man who is sentenced to just the minimum of five years as a convict is nine times in ten a man sentenced to death! Many have managed to escape—some 5,000—but the greater proportion of these were the professional criminals who know best how to get out of the Penal Colony. The little man, the condemned man who is not dangerous, is the one who goes down—and dies there. Only a small percentage, about 3 per cent, of the total of these men banished to French Guiana have received pardons enabling them to return home, and most of these have been foreigners sentenced in France or Arabs sentenced in the French possessions.

The convict sent to Guiana is sent there to be got rid of—to die, or to escape, if he is lucky. The penal system in France is based on the principle, "Once a criminal,

always a criminal," and there is no concern for the moral regeneration of such a man. This is considered as time, money and effort wasted.

The Penal Administration, needless to say, has exploited this harsh principle. It operates the prison so that as many men as possible will die, and it has pretty much closed its eyes to any effective prevention of their attempts to escape. To the Administration, the more who die or escape the fewer to feed and watch, and the more money for the pockets of its officials. And so the Administration has housed them in unsanitary quarters—in eighty-seven years it has not even built them a dining hall in which to eat, although it lacks neither labor nor materials for the construction of one. The convicts have to sit around and eat off plates held on their knees! They contract and die from dysentery, fever, ankylostomia, tropical anemia, tuberculosis, gangrene, beri-beri, trachoma or leprosy. Others die from malnutrition, despair, under the bullets of the ruthless guards, or from the knives of other convicts; and still more become insane. And by the hundreds they have died in the jungle and on the sea, trying to escape, and the thousands who never came back were automatically struck off the prison rolls.

Eighty thousand men! In eighty-five years they have not even been able to make fifty miles of road, or a single plantation, or a single productive industry. They don't grow enough food to feed themselves, or the rude materials to clothe their half-naked bodies.

Every month, for more than a century, now, the Administration has sent in reports to the Ministry in Paris telling about the crimes committed by the convicts among themselves, reporting these in a manner which emphasizes the convict as a dangerous and unredeemable individual, and that the guards expose their lives to constant danger in the pursuance of their duties. And very frequently these reports to the Ministry, so conveniently far away from the scene, in Paris (copies of which I read in the archives), are accompanied by requisitions for increases in salary.

It may be wondered why reform has not come to Devil's Island, why the Penal Administration has been allowed to remain so corrupt. One principal reason for this is that questions and matters of prison systems are not a thing of public concern in France. Penology has never found there a practical and systematic application. Prison policy and administration have not been closely studied by the government, and it is merely considered that the Penal Administration in Guiana is doing the best it can on the whole. Although it has been generally considered by many as a "necessary evil," there has been no serious effort to correct it.

In France, a great many idealists have written a great deal about penology, but the government has never found time to apply their teachings nor to run prisons along modern lines. And so, whenever the question of the horrors of the Penal Colony breaks out afresh in France, and the press starts a campaign for reform, or

even for abolition. the natural thing for the government to resort to is to send an investigating committee to Guiana.

This, of course, in no way bothers the Penal Administration. It knows officially, three to four weeks in advance, that the investigating commission is on its way. When the commission arrives in Guiana the Administration is ready to receive it. It has cleaned house—whitewashed the barracks, distributed fresh clothes, blankets and hats to the convicts, the food ration has become suddenly plentiful and in every way measures up to regulation, the streets of Saint Laurent are cleaned up, and the sickest men are sent out to the most distant jungle camps.

On their rounds of inspection the investigators taste the food—it tastes good and is adequate. One of them calls out a convict and asks him if he has anything to complain about, he points to the food bowl and asks him if he gets enough to eat. The convict has no complaints to make to the investigator—for he knows that the Commandant and guards listening at the commission member's side will make him pay dearly, later, if he has the nerve to tell the truth. Everywhere in the penal settlement, the commission sees just what the Administration wants it to see. Every moment the commission is showered with hospitality, every evening wined and dined by the fawning officials. And so, after a short visit to the Penal Colony, the investigating commission returns to Paris, and reports officially that conditions in Guiana

are as good as could be expected. The report states that the convicts are well fed, well treated and not harshly disciplined, and discounts the press campaigns and books and articles exposing the horrors of Devil's Island as exaggerated fabrications intended to excite the morbid interest of the public. After all, the commission observes, these men are convicts, and the Penal Administration is faced with a hard struggle to take care of them in a tropical climate . . . and is doing the best it can.

More than thirty years ago, Senator Camille Chautemps, after making an exhaustive study of the transportation of condemned men to Guiana, demanded the complete abolition of the prison, admitting that it was an absolute failure from every point considered and that it was also the chief reason for the ruinous condition of the Colony.

In the last twenty years the abolition of Devil's Island has been voted five or six times by the Chamber of Deputies, but never has this vote been ratified by the Senate. The Senate has always seen in the suppression of the prison the prohibitive cost which this would mean, from the consequent necessity of building new penitentiaries in France, and of having to repatriate the convicts and to guard them so they shall not escape into the nation.

Were the men to be kept in France they would not die so rapidly. It would not do to send them to another French colony, for today no colony will receive these convicts, after the disastrous example of French Guiana.

No solution of the problem, therefore, is ever definitely reached; because every time a Ministry falls in France, and they fall quickly, the arguments start all over again. And so the world hears in newspaper headlines every two or three years that Devil's Island is abolished—then, every time after this decision is released to the press, more convoys of convicts are sent to Guiana in the *Martinière* as soon as the central prisons in France become too crowded.

This situation, in a very definite way, has worked greatly to France's advantage, in that it has kept the civilized world believing that Devil's Island is abolished, or else, that France is doing her best to abolish it. While, as a matter of fact, this prison on the American continent will never be abolished, and convicts will never cease being sent overseas across the Atlantic, until pressure is brought to bear on France because of the presence of Devil's Island in their midst, by the governments of the nations of the Americas.

France knows that she can't possibly operate Devil's Island so that the convicts and *libérés* cannot escape. Three of the Governors of French Guiana whom I knew while a convict were all absolutely convinced that the prison could never be reformed, and said that the only solution was to abolish it completely.

France has long known that once the republics of the Americas do become aroused into asking jointly and officially the discontinuance of Devil's Island, or the prevention of the frequent escapes of its convicts, she will

have to abolish the prison—or she will face the risk of losing vital prestige in commerce, cultural relations and good-will.

For over twenty years, now, France has tried to check growing resentment towards her Penal Colony being aroused to the point of concerted action. This was eloquently proved again just last year (1938) when she announced to the world in June that Devil's Island was abolished, that no more convicts would be sent overseas, and that in ten years there would be no more convicts remaining in the Colony. The Lima Conference was going to convene in a few months, and the renewed publicity attracted by Devil's Island had established a possibility that the combined governments at the Conference would move to ask France to keep her convicts at home or within the boundaries of French Guiana. When the Lima Conference was over, France shipped 1,000 convicts to Guiana . . . on the pretext that the prisons at home were overcrowded. In June, 1938, it was explained for the first time just how she proposed to close her prison in America, and once again France had cleverly checkmated a possibility of a joint official protest from the governments on this side of the Atlantic against this prison of hers which has been a curse to the American peoples from Canada to Argentina, with its crime and disease pollution.

However, France is playing a losing game. It is only a matter of time before the statistics in the police bureaus of the American republics will show their govern-

ments beyond any question that they *must* force an issue over Devil's Island, which represents an international insult to the New World.

What *would* the reaction be, let us ask, if the United States had its Sing Sing, Leavenworth, Alcatraz—all its penitentiaries lumped into one—on a strip of coast and some islands in the Mediterranean or the English Channel . . . and even *one* notorious criminal escaped?

Some *five thousand* convicts have escaped from Devil's Island, and many of them the worst criminals of the European underworld, who have thus become propagating centers of vice and crime in the countries of the New World.

APPENDIX

The Text of Ex-Governor Siadous' Letter to the Author

When I read in the French newspaper, *Gringoire*, of February, 1939, the note from Governor Siadous about the Courrèges case, I resolved to write a letter to Monsieur Siadous. This was the first news that he had received from me since I left French Guiana in 1930.

He answered me as follows, the letter reaching me on April 12, 1939:

Bernard Siadous
Honorary Governor General of the Colonies
3 Alleé Alphonse Peyrat
Toulouse, France

Toulouse, April 5, 1939

I thank you, Belbenoit, for acquainting me with the main facts in your life since the day when, with my official sanction, you quitted Guiana. I could not foresee that you would again fall under the guillotine-knife of the Penal Administration, and, above all, that such severities would reward the creditable gesture you made in appearing before it again, within the fixed time, to obtain the renewal of your leave of absence.

You are, certainly, the only condemned prisoner who

has kept his word. As for myself, I should have considered your action as the sign of a definite moral restoration, of that restoration which you had begun so well while serving your sentence, and which, from that moment, made me certain of the honorableness of your future life.

You have happily overcome, anew, this re-accumulation of ill fortune, and there you are, at last free and gratified in a society which does not mark you with any stigma. I am profoundly glad of this!

Why did you not write me when these new troubles descended upon your head? I would have intervened to explain the motives for your action; and I fully believe that I should have secured the attention of the authorities. And it would be my heart-felt wish to intervene even now if it were possible.

One might, perhaps, reproach you for having presented yourself at Le Havre instead of returning to Cayenne. I do not have at hand the regulation which rules in this detail. But, even so, if in that action there was any fault on your part, your motives should have been held to counterbalance it.

Would you give me details, so that, in my turn, I can present them, or have them presented, to the Chief of State?

Belbenoit, you have done well to keep the word you gave. If, in this instance, this loyalty, this will-power, this courage have not, for reasons which escape me, been appreciated at their true value and to your profit, it is these qualities in you which have nevertheless enabled you to overcome adverse circumstances, and to arrive at a port where you will find calm, happiness . . . and where you will live a life which is worthy, in the esteem of those who come near you and in your own esteem.

And, since in your books you tell about your life, think of all the young men who, like yourself, run the risk of suffering the threatening influences of an evil environment, and tell them that it is infinitely safer to seek happiness in the paths of honest work; for one word of advice from one who has lived the two lives, of evil and of good, may have a tremendous influence for good on certain young men, certain weak ones, at the critical hour of their lives.

Do that, Belbenoit, even if you have not done so already, and be glad of the opportunity.

(signed) Siadous